

# **Conceptions about the Nature of Accounts in History: An Exploratory Study of Students' Ideas and Teachers' Assumptions about Students' Understandings in Singapore**

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## Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory study of students' understandings about the nature of accounts in history, and teachers' assumptions about those ideas. The study was designed to achieve two related objectives: first, to explore and map out the range of ideas students in Singapore may hold about the nature of historical accounts, and second, to examine the assumptions teachers in Singapore may have about their students' understandings.

Sixty-nine students (fifty in Year 9 and nineteen in Year 12) across nine institutions completed two written task-sets designed to generate data on students' ideas about accounts. Group interviews were conducted with all students. 93 teachers responded to a questionnaire survey designed to explore teachers' ideas about students' understanding of accounts. In-depth interviews with nine teachers were carried out to supplement questionnaire data. Data analysis of students' ideas pointed to a broad range of student conceptions about accounts, and to the possibility of viewing these conceptions progressively across a 'factual-multiple-criterial' continuum. Analysis of data that focused on teachers' assumptions about students' ideas revealed the possibility of viewing students' conceptions in 'simple' to 'complex' terms, ranging progressively from (i) static and binary, to (ii) subjective and perspectiveful, and to (iii) dynamic and multi-dimensional.

This thesis makes the argument that approaching the teaching of school history in a responsive way requires that Singapore teachers recognize the range of preconceptions that students hold about accounts. Specifically, this is done by

engaging students' ideas to help them make sense of new knowledge and develop their disciplinary understandings about history. The implications these findings have on planning, research, assessment and practice are discussed in the context of a history pedagogy that is both *receptive* to an understanding of the methodological underpinnings of the discipline, and *responsive* to the notion of developing students' understandings of historical knowledge.

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## Declaration of Word Count

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution of made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Word count (exclusive of appendixes, the full list of references and bibliographies, but including footnotes, endnotes, glossary, maps, diagrams & tables): 79,988 words

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**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'S' followed by a series of loops and a final horizontal stroke.

**Date:**            **6 Sept 2012**

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## Introduction

Understanding history is an intellectually challenging task for many students in schools. Such an undertaking requires both teachers and students to contemplate issues, events and people who had lived in the distant past and who are often far removed in time and familiarity. Too often, however, historical instruction in schools takes the form of memorising a litany of facts and names, and is taught through textbooks that are at times difficult for students to read and at other times just plain boring (Brophy, 1990; Beck & McKeown, 1991). Consequently, students may conceive history learning as the uncritical absorption and memorisation of copious amounts of content knowledge (that may not be relevant to everyday life). Yet, while such views regarding students' perceptions about the subject may be commonplace, few have ventured to go beyond these apparent negative perceptions to consider other aspects of students' ideas that also may hinder the development of proper historical understanding.

Surveying the landscape of history education research in Singapore, one is struck not only by the sparseness of works that address fundamental questions about how history is taught in schools, but also by the absence of any research that attempts to explore students' prior ideas about history. In fact, most history teachers rarely see the need to familiarize themselves with the kinds of ideas students bring into the classrooms, much less explore students' preconceptions about the nature of historical knowledge. Based on my experience as a teacher and my discussions with former colleagues, the impression that has informally emerged from these discussions is that teachers, while genuinely concerned about their students' ability to do well in the

subject, are not necessarily perturbed about how students viewed the nature of accounts or other disciplinary concepts in history. Finding out what sort of ideas students bring into the classroom and how they could use knowledge of how students learn the subject to enhance their historical understanding was hardly a point of practical concern for many teachers. For the most part, the existence of a prescribed textbook and a pre-selected content was sufficient as materials for historical instruction. Coupled with other more serious concerns such as a largely uncompromising curriculum set within a limited time frame, as well as a strong purpose to meet the requirements of assessment modes and accountability in the examinations, it was largely perceived that history teaching need not go beyond the transfer of 'historical' knowledge or content. This, however, should not be confused with learning history. As Lee (1991: pp.48-49) maintained,

[it is] absurd ... to say that schoolchildren know any history if they have no understanding of how historical knowledge is attained, its relationship to evidence, and the way in which historians arbitrate between competing or contradictory claims. The ability to recall accounts without any understanding of the problems involved in constructing them or the criteria involved in evaluating them has nothing historical about it. Without an understanding of what makes an account historical, there is nothing to distinguish such an ability from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths or poems.

Implicit in the above quote is the suggestion that acquiring the kind of knowledge that is deemed *historical* must involve equipping students with more 'powerful' ways of understanding history and the historical past (Lee & Ashby, 2000: p.216). This may include, among other things, getting students to come to grips with the disciplinary basis of the subject and having them understand how knowledge about

the past is constructed, adjudicated and arbitrated. To do this, teachers must themselves be aware of the nature of the historical discipline and be predisposed to thinking about classroom instruction in terms of developing or modifying students' ideas and understandings about aspects of history and the past. As research evidence from the work of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999) has shown, an important starting point for teachers is the recognition that students bring into the classroom their pre-existing ideas about history – ideas that are based on their own life experiences about how the world works, and about how we can know something about the past. If students are to become effective learners, teachers have the critical responsibility to engage these initial understandings, both as a means to help students make sense of new knowledge they encounter, and to develop more advanced conceptual understandings about the discipline.

This study explores the range of ideas students in Singapore have about a key disciplinary concept in history – *accounts* – and attempts to map out key changes in students' ideas about accounts by examining, first, how students view differences between historical accounts, and second, how students decide between rival historical accounts, and the range of ideas they are likely to hold about the 'better' account. Subsequently, the study examines the assumptions teachers in Singapore have about their students' understandings, and the extent to which these assumptions correspond with the ideas the research evidence suggests students in Singapore hold. Studies that attempt to explore possible connections between students' ideas and teachers' assumptions about these ideas are scarce. Almost certainly, such studies would have direct implications for curriculum development, pedagogy and

assessment as well as for the preparation of those who undertake the challenging task of classroom teaching. Approaching the teaching of school history in a responsive way requires that Singapore teachers think about instruction with students' preconceptions in mind – by engaging these initial understandings to help students make sense of new knowledge and develop their appreciation of history and the past. Understanding teachers' assumptions about students' ideas has important repercussions for teaching and learning, as a lack of awareness of the kinds of pre-existing ideas students bring to the classroom may inadvertently lead teachers to try to teach students more complex ideas even before simpler ones have been understood. In a very practical way, the anticipated outcomes of the current investigation may provide researchers and practitioners with useful insights that are both important and relevant for classroom teaching.

In building research information regarding students' ideas about historical accounts and the ways teachers may view these ideas, this study aims to present findings based on research conducted within a different cultural context (i.e. Singapore), and from which further comparisons could be made across national contexts. Given the limited research work on students' and teachers' ideas, the current study also aims to contribute to a developing understanding of the possible ways teachers' conceptions and assumptions about students' ideas may influence classroom practice and student learning. The hope is that the findings and conclusions offered in this study may serve to guide teachers as they make curricular decisions that would help develop students' ideas about accounts and move these ideas towards higher level understandings.

This study comprises seven chapters. The first chapter starts off with a survey of existing literature that has been at the forefront of history education research both within the UK as well as internationally. The rationale of starting the study with a literature review is to situate the present study within the broader research paradigms that are dominant in history education research. In highlighting the need for further research in the field, the chapter also raises possible gaps in knowledge concerning students' and teachers' ideas about the nature of accounts in history and proposes research directions (and questions) that are likely to test our understandings with regard to key issues identified in this study.

The second chapter discusses the context of the study and describes the institutional environment within which history education and history instruction in school operates. The human and institutional settings are important considerations in the development of the research design used in this study, enabling research decisions to be made with due respect to the context of the Singapore educational system.

The third chapter addresses the methodology of the research investigation. The discussion in this chapter includes the description of the planned methodological structures specifically designed for the study, the theoretical framework underpinning the study, and other methodological issues pertinent to the investigation.

The fourth chapter provides a report on two pilot studies that were conducted in the first two research cycles. The discussion in this chapter details the manner in which findings from the pilot studies were used to re-shape the original research

instruments, influence the developing research design, and inform the methodological frameworks. The analysis of the pilot data illustrates the importance of preliminary work in the exploratory stages as the basis for subsequent analysis and interpretation of the main data, in line with the *grounded theory* approach used in this investigation.

The fifth chapter provides a descriptive analysis of students' data used in the study and presents the findings of students' ideas about accounts across two aspects, namely, their ideas about why accounts were different, and the evaluative moves they were likely to make when deciding on the better account.

The sixth chapter presents the findings from an analysis of teachers' data generated in the study and suggests some ways in which the range of assumptions these teachers held about students' ideas and understandings of accounts may be viewed and understood.

The seventh chapter concludes the study by reflecting on the key findings and suggesting some implications for practice and future research work.



# Chapter 1: Academic context of the Study

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out to trace the development of academic research that has been carried out in the area of historical understanding. The purpose of the survey is to enable the researcher to locate his research investigation into teachers' and students' ideas about accounts within the larger context of history education research. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of initial research evidence on children's historical thinking and moves on to discuss more recent research about children's historical understandings. Thereafter, the chapter examines a key debate about the contested nature of accounts in history within the context of philosophical disputes about historical knowledge. Subsequently, the relevance of such debates for school history is examined, and this will be followed by a brief review of empirical research that has thus far been conducted on students' ideas about historical accounts in the UK, Europe, the US and Canada. Finally, the chapter concludes by situating the current investigation within the larger research traditions by identifying the current 'gaps' in knowledge about children's understandings of historical accounts, and explains the rationale for the present study.

## 1.2 Research on children's thinking in history: The historical antecedents

The existing body of literature on children's historical thinking has been informed and influenced, in part, by the work of psychologists and cognitive theorists in education. Despite their different ideas and subject matter interests, the works of

eminent psychologists and pedagogues such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner have, in large measure, provided the theoretical foundations for subsequent research into students' thinking. Piaget's view of how children's minds work and develop, for example, has proved enormously influential, particularly in education theory. One of the most enduring insights that he proposed, which was developed further in the works of Hallam and Peel in their research on history learning in schools, is the role of maturation in children's increasing capacity to understand their world. Piaget's four-stage model in the development of children's thinking generally points to the inability of children to undertake certain tasks until they are 'psychologically mature' enough to do so (Piaget, 1969). He posited that children's thinking develops at different points of transition, and that, before they have reached these points, children (no matter how intelligent) are not capable of understanding things in certain ways.

Although Piaget's research was not focused on students' historical understanding, his developmental theory of cognition had a profound impact on the work of subsequent researchers investigating the nature of children's thinking in history. Hallam (1970), one of a number of researchers who had utilized the Piagetian framework to investigate children's historical thinking, argued that even the oldest elementary students are unable to deal with the conceptual abstractions, expansive time-frames, broad generalities, and complex causal inferences which characterized the historical discipline. Hallam's research suggested that a child could only think deductively or hypothetically (attributes crucial to the development of historical understanding) when he/she is around 16 years of age (Hallam, 1978). His thesis corroborated Peel's (1967) earlier work which found that the beginnings of genuine

explanatory ability requiring ideas independent of the details of an event or action only appeared in older adolescents in the age range of 16-18. Significantly, Hallam suggested that teaching strategies (even if they involved new active teaching styles designed to accelerate children's thinking processes) were not the most important elements in helping students progress.

While these conclusions did not indicate children's inability to learn historical facts, they nonetheless posed grave challenges to the teaching and learning of history in schools. The conclusions seemed to suggest that there was little justification in teaching disciplinary aspects of history before students reached the age of 16 as these students were presumed unable to acquire an appreciable understanding of the historical past, much less understand the concepts and methodology essential to history learning. Such views, however, have not garnered much support over the past 30 years. Other researchers, who did not fully subscribe to the developmental model of children's thinking espoused by the 'Piaget-Hallam-Peel tradition' (Downey & Levstik, 1991), argued for an alternative framework for research on children's historical thinking that was not constrained by a rigid schema or fixed stages of cognitive maturity. These researchers maintained the 'inappropriateness' of transplanting a developmental model of thinking based on research in mathematical and scientific experiments onto a 'unique cognitive discipline' (Wineburg, 1998) such as history, whose character may be 'distinctively different' from that of science (Dickinson & Lee, 1978).

In totally rejecting Piaget, Booth (1983, 1987), for example, argued that Piaget's model was not appropriate for measuring historical thinking. Instead, he placed

strong emphases on how children thought historically, and contended that it was not possible for historical thinking to be assimilated to rigid stages defined by hypothetical-deductive thought structures. Booth, who favoured Vygotsky's and Bruner's 'social constructivist' notions of cognitive development in his research, concluded 'with optimism', that '14-to 16-year old pupils are perfectly capable of construing the past in a genuinely historical manner' (1994: p.65) and 'to conceptualize' at relatively sophisticated levels (1980: p.246). Other researchers, such as Dickinson and Lee (1978), agreed that the Piagetian model of cognitive development could not be absolutely applied to history without taking into account the differences between history and science. History may be *sui-generis*, and hence, problems of empirical research on thinking in history were different from those in the physical (or natural) sciences.

The evidence accumulated by several British researchers looking for an alternative framework to explain children's historical thinking pointed clearly to the rigidity of Piaget's developmental scheme. Instead these researchers began to acknowledge the importance of teaching methodology as a vital component in developing students' historical thinking. Significantly, there was a shift in the focus of researchers from students' *thinking* to students' *ideas*, in particular, their tacit understandings, and appreciation of concepts, in history. The subsequent focus of these British researchers was on the techniques, strategies and contexts that could be used to help students develop advanced historical understandings. To a large extent, Bruner's constructivist theory became a general framework for instruction in subsequent research in children's historical thinking in the United Kingdom, and more recently in the United States.

Bruner believed that learning was an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge (Bruner, 1966). Within the setting of research in history education, Bruner's theoretical framework led to the idea that 'the central goal of a learner who is "doing" history is to learn the characteristics of a professional historian and to master the central concepts of the historical discipline' (in Gunning, 1978: p.12). These involved understanding concepts such as evidence, source, and 'the notion of the tentative, provisional nature of historical judgements'. Significantly, Bruner's work provided a firm justification for the launch of the Schools' Council History Project (SCHP) in the early 1970s, an innovative attempt at 'a new look at history' that yielded what Wineburg described as 'the most in-depth look at adolescent historical reasoning to date' (1996, 2001: p.43).

Drawing heavily on Paul Hirst's theory of academic disciplines as 'forms of knowledge' (1974) which constitute different ways of knowing, and Bruner's 'structure of the disciplines', the SCHP questioned strict Piagetian applications to historical thinking. Project founders argued that students were capable of achieving higher levels of historical understanding if history was conceived as a *distinctive* form of knowledge. Accordingly, new initiatives advocated structuring the history curriculum around the nature of historical enquiry and teaching students to appreciate history as a sophisticated form of knowledge. The overall picture that emerged from the evaluation of the SCHP provided a portrait of adolescent reasoning that 'contrasted sharply with the barren images of adolescent reasoning offered by the Piagetians' (Wineburg, 2001; p.42). Denis Shemilt (1980), in his

*Evaluation Study of the Schools Council Project: History 13-16*, concluded that the course, with its emphasis on problem-solving and concept-related teaching, had made a significant difference in terms of how project students had performed against a control group of equal ability and age. He surmised that students who had ‘undertaken the Project course are either more capable or more inclined to use high level concepts and to think about history in propositional terms’ (p.44).

Shemilt’s findings in his Evaluation Study impacted the work of many other researchers in the UK, and reinforced earlier work on empathy (or rational thinking) by Dickinson and Lee (1978). The research findings that arose out of the SCHP and Shemilt’s evaluation study were further consolidated by another research effort, Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches), which explored the nature of children’s second-order ideas. Among other things, the researchers (Alaric Dickinson, Peter Lee and Ros Ashby of London’s Institute of Education), found that some students appeared to demonstrate more sophisticated and inclusive notions of ‘knowledge’ about historical accounts (Lee & Ashby, 2000), were able to offer plausible (if simple) reasons to explain people’s actions in the past (Lee, Dickinson & Ashby, 1997), and had the capacity to acquire a predisposition for empathetic understanding of the past (Lee & Ashby, 2001).

CHATA’s findings supported those of earlier research undertaken by Dickinson and Lee (1978), Shemilt (1983) and Ashby and Lee (1986), and demonstrated the capacity of children to come to terms with the historical past, provided adequate tasks as well as supportive teaching were in evidence. One consistent conclusion reached by the CHATA team was that some children, at a relatively young age, may

already operate with ‘highly sophisticated ideas’. As such, it was possible to teach them to develop proper frameworks of history through systematic teaching that built on prior understandings (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Nevertheless, while the statistical results of CHATA in the area of ‘progression’ generally seemed to show an age-related progression in students’ ideas about historical accounts, Dickinson, Lee and Ashby did not support any claim that students’ ideas simply matured of their own accord. Citing evidence from SChP that clearly indicated that teaching substantially modified, or changed students’ ideas (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1996; Lee & Ashby, 2000), the researchers maintained that these important historical understandings and ‘dispositions’ have to be developed in the classroom. In other words, transforming student understandings and ideas about history required explicit teaching and reflection on the nature of evidence and historical accounts, and the different ways in which different types of claims could be tested for validity (Lee, 2005).

### **1.3 Current research on students’ historical understandings**

In the past decade, a large amount of research has emerged both within and outside the UK which analyzes the ways students develop understandings in history. Generally, these studies focused on the need for an active approach to history where students may be seen to engage in the act of ‘doing history’ (Wineburg, 1991; Carretero & Voss, 1994; Barton & Levstik, 1996; Brophy & Van Sledright, 1997; Foster & Yeager 1999; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000; Davis, Yeager & Foster, 2001; Lee, Dickinson & Ashby, 2001; Levstik & Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 2004), as a means to get them to know something about the way history works. While the goal of such an approach was not to create mini-

historians out of students, many of these studies appeared to suggest the importance of getting students to come to grips with the nature of the discipline by providing opportunities for students to view history more intelligently. This may involve getting them to understand ‘multiple perspectives’ in history, providing opportunities for students to grapple with the notion of competing or contradictory historical interpretations of past events, as well as the importance of having students ask historical questions and critically examine available sources, as evidence of the historical past (Lee & Ashby, 2000). The main concern was on helping students recognize certain ‘heuristics’ (Wineburg, 1991) that historians used to construct an understanding of events from fragments or traces of the past, and equipping them with an ‘intellectual toolkit’ (Lee, 1998, 1999) to help them make sense of conflicting accounts or passages about the past.

Acquiring the ability to think historically, however, poses quite a challenge for many students especially since historical thinking has rarely been seen as a natural process or regarded as an automatic progression of psychological development. Most researchers regard historical thinking as ‘counter-intuitive’ (Lee, 1999), which actually goes ‘against the grain of how we ordinarily think’ (Wineburg, 2001: p.7). Students often see the past as something that is ‘given’, ‘known’ and ‘fixed’ (Lee, 1999), and are frequently predisposed to a ‘way of thinking that requires little effort’ and one that ‘comes quite naturally’ (Wineburg: p.19). In fact, *presentism* – the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present (Wineburg, 1998, 2001) – largely influences the way many students (and adults) look at things in the historical past. As a way of viewing the past, presentism may cover a whole range of ‘repertoires’ that students may use to explain human actions and behaviour (Lee & Ashby, 2001), the



working assumption being that people in the past were fundamentally similar to (or more commonly worse than) people today in values and beliefs (Seixas, 1994c, and in Lee & Ashby, 1997, 2001).

Many researchers have given due recognition to the role of 'presentism' in today's learning of history in schools, and how this way of viewing the past is problematic especially for young students who 'may not be able to escape their own attitudes and world views in order to understand those of the past' (Downey, cited in Foster & Yeager, 1998: p.15). For the most part, students' prior knowledge of historical events often appeared 'disconnected from moorings in the historical life and context' of the period under study, so much so that it is 'common for students today to judge past actions by present day contexts' (VanSledright, 1996b: p.136). Growing research in Europe and North America that centred on exploring how students made sense of past actions, practices and institutions confirmed earlier findings by UK researchers that students displayed a strong tendency to think in terms of an inferior or a 'deficit' past (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Lee & Ashby, 2001). Research with students in Greece and Italy, however, may suggest an opposite view. As opposed to students' 'deficit' views of the past as found in the CHATA research, research work in Greece, for example, pointed to students' views of a past that was glorious or superior to the present (Apostolidou, 2007). Where 'presentist' thinking exists, it presents a formidable obstacle to students' acquisition of progressive historical understandings; this would certainly have far-reaching consequences for students' attempts to acquire and develop a meaningful understanding of the historical past.

The problematical issue of ‘intractable presentism’ (Shapiro, 1999: p.1) also may impact students’ capacity to adjudicate the truth of the content written in academic histories and other genres of historical representation. A related issue more prominent in contemporary classrooms in the UK is the kind of awareness or understandings that students demonstrate in trying to distinguish between or handle conflicts among differing historical accounts of the past. Studies, in the UK, the US as well as in other national contexts, have shown that students, across different age groups, tend to falter in the face of multiple versions of passages of the past. Often, students appeared intellectually unprepared when confronted with dilemmas about how they should make sense of the multiplicity of versions of the past. Without an ‘intellectual toolkit’ (Lee, 1998) or some ‘tools of historiography’ (Seixas, 2000) to help them adjudicate between the different accounts, students may not have the means to assess the multiple historical interpretations of events. A failure to equip students with knowledge of history’s disciplinary procedures may possibly lead to relativism (Seixas, 2000) or push students’ views about differences in historical accounts into a relativistic, shoulder-shrugging helplessness (Lee & Ashby, 2000).

These issues, however, extend beyond the boundaries of classroom instruction and what students should learn in their history classes. In fact, issues surrounding the nature of historical knowledge and the epistemological, as well as the ontological, assumptions underlying that knowledge have been contested by philosophers of history and practising historians time and again. As David Lowenthal (2000) pointed out, such ‘obfuscations of history’ and ‘impediments to historical understanding’ are not new but they have been aggravated today partly by the emergence of the postmodernist stance (p.68), which denies ‘all claims to historical truth’ and rejects

‘any judgments that sanction some versions over others’. One of the most recent debates that has led to a high degree of philosophical reflection on historical practice was the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ that followed the publication of Hayden White’s (1978) controversial, yet massively influential book, *Metahistory*. This important shift in the theory and philosophy of history pushed into the light the complex and contested nature of historical accounts, and fundamentally challenged the role of the historical narrative as a legitimate source of ‘true facts’ that are ‘representative’ of a ‘real past’. At the centre of the debate was the tussle over the nature and status of historical accounts, principally the narrative, as ‘representational’ of reality and a credible source of true knowledge about the past.

The subsequent sections deal briefly with some aspects of the ‘quarrel between historians and postmodernists’ (Anchor, 1999: p.111) and examine the impact these debates may have on school history. An important consideration that underlies the survey of the main issues of contention is the ‘criteria’ or ‘methods’ that students (and teachers) may likely be working with when adjudicating or arbitrating between different historical narratives. As will be later shown, these debates in analytic philosophy of history are largely epistemic in nature, and challenge the ‘truthfulness’ of historians’ accounts against matters of ‘form’, as well as the social or ideological ‘location’ of the narrator.

#### **1.4 The postmodern challenge to the narrative representation of the past in historical writings**

The assault by postmodernists and poststructuralists on the foundation of historical knowledge called into question, for the first time, the credentials of history as a

serious discipline (Tosh, 2002) and ‘challenged the very possibility of doing history at all’ (Fulbrook, 2002: p.18). The veracity of historical knowledge and theoretical validity of the discipline became an issue of debate as historians of every political creed became ‘haunted by a sense of gloom’ (Evans, 1997: p.3) over the future of the historical discipline. ‘History’, wrote Appleby, Hunt & Jacob (1994) ‘is shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations’ (p.1). Lawrence Stone spoke of a ‘crisis of self-confidence’ in the historical fraternity and warned historians about the possibility of history ‘becoming an endangered species’ if the postmodernists gained any more influence (Stone, 1991: p.218). Arthur Marwick declared postmodernist ideas as a ‘menace to serious historical study’ (Marwick, 1995: p.29). Sir Geoffrey Elton launched a vehement diatribe that criticized postmodernist ideas of history as ‘menacing’, ‘destructive’, ‘absurd’ and ‘meaningless’ and called upon historians to fight those who were trying to ‘subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics’ (Elton, 1991: p.41). Raphael Samuel, too, made clear his aversion to postmodernist ideas and warned that ‘the deconstructive turn in contemporary thought’ was inviting people to ‘see history not as a record of the past, more or less faithful to the facts’, but ‘as an invention, or fiction, of historians themselves’ (1992: p.220). In trying to ‘save’ history from its ‘extended epistemological crisis’ (Harlan, 1989: p.589), proponents of the discipline have found it necessary to submit a ‘defence of history’ (Evans, 1997), and called for a ‘return to essentials’ (Elton, 1991).

Arguably, the theoretical and philosophical questions over which postmodernists and historians have traded barbed comments were ‘epistemological’ in nature. Barring Ankersmit’s denial – that matters of ‘representation’ are not fundamentally matters

of epistemology (Ankersmit, 1994: p.37) – a key point of contention that contributed to the intellectual exchanges was the disputed nature of historical writing and how narrative accounts of history claimed to ‘represent’ the past as it actually happened. While such a contention had long been challenged even before postmodernists came to the scene, proponents of the postmodernist view of history repudiated the possibility of an ‘uninterpreted reality’ that was independent of the observer. Drawing on ‘discourse’ theories of influential French structuralists, and accenting the literary conventions that were consciously (or otherwise) embedded in historical narratives, postmodern writers postulated an inherent problem of representation (of reality) in a historian’s account of the past. According to postmodernist theory, historical narratives, regarded as the ‘only’ form of account of past events, are literally (fictional) stories borne out of an historian’s imaginative construction, and ‘emplotted’ with a literary form that in themselves the events did not have.

For many postmodern thinkers, there was no possibility of recovering the past, as the ‘stories’ or ‘accounts’ that historians constructed were separated from the real world they professed to depict due to their ‘textual’ form (i.e. narrative accounts). In this regard, the works of influential French structuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes have been instrumental. Language, according to these philosophers, is inherently unstable, variable in its meanings over time, and contested in its own time (Tosh, 2002). For these thinkers, to presuppose that language ‘reflects’ reality was a representational fallacy. Derrida, for example, maintained that texts do not ‘transparently reflect’ reality (that ‘there is nothing outside the text’), and that documents change meaning with each authorial inference (cited in Tosh, 2002: p.124). Foucault similarly denied the ‘reality’ that historical

texts purport to present as, according to him, these are merely ‘ideological products’ of the dominant discourse – a fiction of narrative order imposed on the irreducible chaos of events by those who had more power in the historical profession than its critics. Ultimately, history as written by professionals, insisted Barthes, is not reconstructed (past) reality but simply ‘a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts’ (quoted in Evans, 1997: p.81).

In denouncing postmodernism’s ‘allergy to the problem of truth’, Chris Lorenz (1994, quoted in Anchor, 1999: p.112) charged that any historian who applied Derrida’s ‘*il n’y a pas de hors texte*’ (‘there is nothing outside the text’) to the writing of history ceased to be of interest to the historian *qua* historian. As Lawrence Stone pointed out, ‘If there is nothing outside the text, then history as we have known it collapses altogether, and fact and fiction become indistinguishable from one another’ (in Jenkins, 1997: p.256). Others questioned the notion of historical writing as essentially ideological products of the ‘dominant discourse’. Elton (1991) argued that professionalized historical study – systematic, thorough and grounded in the sources – ‘has time and again destroyed those interpretations that served particular interests, more especially national self-esteem and self-confidence’ (p.44).

Nonetheless, postmodernist thinkers such as Keith Jenkins insisted that historical writing is essentially ‘an inter-textual linguistic construct’ (Jenkins, 1991: p.9) – free-floating, relative and subjective. According to Jenkins, the historian’s account can never correspond with the past, as the past is gone, irrecoverable. As such, no account can ever be checked against the ‘past’ but only against other accounts constructed by historians who are rooted in the politics of today. Seen in this light,

for postmodernists, all versions of history are 'presentist' (Tosh, 2002), contingent upon our own views and our own 'present' (Jenkins, 1991). Consequently, as there is nothing in the past that can be found, the 'things held by most historians to be intrinsic (historical facts, structures, periods and meanings) are actually extrinsic ascriptions ... the exercise of endless interpretive freedom by historians' (Jenkins, 2003: p.10). In fact, the postmodernist's relativist stance accepts, and even celebrates, a multiplicity of stories and a plurality of concurrent interpretations: all can be equally valid (or invalid) (Tosh, 2002). As the historians 'invent', rather than 'uncover', the past, Hayden White wrote, 'one must face the fact that, when it comes to the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning rather than another' (in Jenkins, 1997: p.392).

White's leading argument is that historical narratives are essentially 'constructions' or 'imaginative inventions' that a historian imposes on a sequence of past events, and that historical narrations *qua* historical interpretations can only be assessed in terms of the kind of truth that is appropriate to literary works (Carroll, 1998: p.37). 'Stories', White insisted, are 'invented', and not 'found', and hence, there can never be a 'real story' of the past. White argued that the coherence inbuilt in a 'historical narrative...reveals to us a world that is putatively "finished", done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart' (White, 1987: p.21). As such, the incoherent historical series of events begin to take coherent shape only through the narrative effort of the historian. Hence, for White, narrative history is unavoidably fictional, and falls short of a 'complete and perspectiveless reproduction' of the past, regardless of whether this ideal was possible (or even desirable) in the first place (in

Velleman, 2003: p.27). As such, historical narratives do not have any value in the 'representation of reality' and, by virtue of their tropological organization, will always fail in their attempt to represent reality (Callinicos, 1995). White's position has been championed by other philosophers and theorists such as Ankersmit, who viewed historical texts as substitutes for the absent past, as historians do not produce a 'representation' of reality but a replacement or substitute for it (Ankersmit, 1989, 1990).

In refuting White's 'constructivism', Noël Carroll (1998) questioned the compelling comprehensiveness of the former's assertions that historical narratives do not correspond to what existed in the past and are, therefore, fictional. Carroll argued that although narratives, as forms of representation, are in that sense, invented, that does not preclude their capacity to provide accurate information about the past (p.41). He rationalized that many of White's arguments for the fictionality of historical narratives hinged on contrasting these narratives with *copies* of the past. This premise that 'any addition (imaginative construction) or subtraction of detail (selection) from such a copy, conceived of on the model of a mirror, is evidence of fictionality' was, however, not acceptable or admissible to Carroll (p.47). He rejected the notion that historians in pursuing their craft, and informed as they are by the available evidence, can construe their narratives as perfect 'replicas' of the past. Carroll instead accused White of forcing historians to confront a dilemma: 'Either historical narratives are copies in the relevant sense or they are fictional' (p.44). Carroll intimated that many historians would be dismayed to learn that their writing was fictional. He wrote, 'Historians, it is fair to say, intend the audience to believe the content of their work – to believe that it applies to the historical past – and in that



sense their writing is squarely non-fictional, even if it shares certain formal expositional structures with fictional writing' (2000: p.400). The best way to deal with this dilemma then, according to Carroll, is to reject it – to maintain that historical narratives are not and, in fact, should not be copies in the mirror sense, while also maintaining that this does not make them fictional (1998: p.44).

Carroll also argued that White's presumed disjunction that either there is one real story or a multiplicity of fictional ones failed to accommodate the fact that courses of action intersect and branch off from shared events. He pointed out that events have different *significances* in different courses of events, and therefore, can be represented in different stories. Consequently, different stories can exist because there are discrete courses of events whose interest is relative to the *questions* the historians ask of the evidence. This relativity, Carroll maintained, precludes the possibility of an absolute story, but it does not make the historical narrative fictional (p.49). Rather, it makes the accuracy of the non-fictional account assessable in terms of what questions are being directed to the relevant courses of events.

'White's deepest problem', Carroll added, is that 'he believes that truth is the only relevant grounds for the epistemic assessment of historical narratives' (p.52). He proposed that a way of dodging this dilemma was to note that the selections and deletions of a historical narrative are always subjected to objective standards, which 'though not unrelated to ascertaining truth, are not reducible to truth'. This idea of historical 'truth' may be better understood in Lorenz's explanation: 'the guiding principle of historians is not truth per se, nor indeed the whole truth, but an acceptable truth' (Lorenz, 1994, 1998: p.365) – one that recognizes the weight of

historians' interests and purposes, as well as the evidential constraints that bound their interpretation of past events. Carroll, argued, however, that a historical account needed to do more than merely stating the 'truth'; it also must meet various standards of *objectivity* (such as comprehensiveness, accuracy and consistency). In this respect, Carroll's argument shared many similarities with those that have been put forward by Lorenz (1994, 1998), Bevir (1994, 1997, 2002) and McCullagh (2000, 2004).

### **1.5 The contested nature of historical narratives, 'relativism' and its effects on school history**

The philosophical debates regarding the nature of historical narratives (as exemplified by the exchanges between Hayden White and Noel Carroll) point to the difficulties in reaching a common position on the veracity of accounts as 'representative' of a 'historical' past. Indeed, the 'hyper-relativism' brought about by the 'linguistic turn' (Evans, 1997), as well as the exhortations to reject conventional ways of historicizing knowledge about the past had important consequences on school history and how historical knowledge is understood by students. In a real sense, these debates have had a very direct relevance to the kind of history instruction that takes place in schools. The startling intensity of the debates over the nature of history that should be taught in American schools, for example, manifested itself in the very public exchanges over the national history standards during the 'History Wars' of the mid-1990s (see Nash, Crabtree & Dunn, 1997).

In Britain, debates over the nature of historical knowledge have also become an issue for how history should be taught in schools and universities (see Jenkins, 1991). In an article in *Teaching History*, for example, Keith Jenkins, together with Peter

Brickley, launched a mildly polemical postmodern critique on the ineffectuality of teaching empathy in schools, their basic position being that the past is unknowable, empathetically irretrievable and that understanding the actions of people in the past is impossible (Jenkins & Brickley, 1989, and in Lee & Ashby, 2001). As such, historical empathy is not only difficult to achieve, but fundamentally impossible. Their assertions, however, have been roundly criticized by history educators as 'confused' and 'muddled' (Lee & Ashby, 2001: p.22), and that their 'sharp and provocative postmodernist stab' at the concept of empathy was 'further muddying the waters' (Foster, 2001: p.171).

Other history education researchers are similarly unconvinced of postmodernism's theoretical contributions to history curricula in schools. Seixas (2000), for example, believed that any call for teaching postmodern history can never rest on the grounds that it tells the truth about the nature of historical knowledge. While he accepted that postmodernist theory may open a way for students to understand the relationship between narratives about the past and the political interests of those who construct them in the present, he remained wary about the side effects of 'a regimen of pedagogical postmodernism', including problems of 'excessive relativism and nihilism' (Seixas, 2000: p.9). Evidently, there are grounds to believe that students may subscribe to a 'relativist' disposition when faced with multiple accounts of an historical event. According to Lee (1996), relativism in various forms had always been visible in history classrooms, and it was likely that postmodern ideas had reached them too (see Jenkins, 1991, 1995). Interestingly, research by Lee and Ashby indicated that some students seemed to operate with a notion of 'relativism' very similar to the one Rorty claimed is not held by anyone: 'that two incompatible

opinions on an important topic are equally good' (in Lee & Ashby, 2000: p.222). As a consequence of the belief that nothing can be known for certain about a past, some students were found to endorse the notion that it was the right or the duty (of a historian) to give an opinion in history, which transcended any obligation to validity or truth (Lee & Ashby, 2000).

Despite these telling findings, Seixas remained optimistic that teachers will not 'lose' their students to relativism if they told them that history is not 'just the facts' (2002). In discussing the purposes of history teaching, he reasoned that students already have been exposed to many conflicting historical interpretations and competing claims or narratives outside of school. He argued that students should instead be equipped with the means to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the myths they encounter all around them, and robustly maintained that the schools' 'failure to teach history's disciplinary procedures is more likely to lead to relativism' in students' historical beliefs (Seixas, 2000: p.25). Similarly, British researchers Lee, Ashby and Dickinson maintained that it was important for students to be given tasks that would allow them to develop proper understandings about history and the past. In reviewing the state of history education in the UK (in *Issues in History Teaching*, Arthur & Phillips, 2001), they argued that students must be taught to recognize that stories are not so much copies of the past as ways of looking at it (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 2001). Lee further maintained that if students are not to be helpless in the face of diversities and apparent fragmentation, shrugging their shoulders at a multiplicity of opinions, they must be equipped with the best tools to weigh up the multiplicity of pasts offered in a multiplicity of stories and be given a mental

apparatus that can allow them to understand the nature of stories that historians construct (Lee, 1998).

The call for schools to focus on developing students' disciplinary understandings about history, however, is not a new development, particularly in the British education system. History education in Britain had changed in complex ways since the 1960s such that a major shift had occurred by the early 1990s by the time of the advent of the National Curriculum (Clark, 1990; Booth, 1993; Sylvester, 1995; Lee, 1995; Phillips, 2000). This shift – described as 'a shift from the assumption that school history was only a matter of acquiring substantive history to a concern with students' second-order ideas' (Lee & Ashby, 2000: p.199) – was borne out of British research (into curriculum development, assessment procedures and teaching) since the mid-1970s that had presupposed history's complex and sophisticated nature as a discipline.

In his SCHP Evaluation study, for example, Shemilt argued that adolescents should learn 'something of the logic of history and the meaning of such key ideas as "change", "development", "cause and effect" and so on' (1980). Similarly, Lee and Ashby also advocated the view of learning history as 'coming to grips with a discipline, with its own procedures and standards designed to make true statements and valid claims about the past' (Lee & Ashby, 2000: p.200). As Lee argued, the legitimate outcome of history in schools should be that students know and understand something of history as the *past*, and as a *discipline*. It should be possible, subsequently, for this latter knowledge to be thought of in terms of a

progression of ideas in history, and assessed in terms of students' increasing understanding of the discipline (Lee, 1999, 2005).

### **1.6 Research on students' ideas about historical accounts: Specific studies in the UK and Europe**

Lee commented on the surprisingly little research interest in ideas about historical accounts (Lee, 1996). Since then, apart from work by the CHATA researchers, a number of research investigations that focused on children's ideas about accounts have been undertaken across several national contexts (Barca, 2005; Gago, 2005; Hsiao, 2008; Chapman, 2009). One major project that had been an early trailblazer in exploring children's second-order ideas, however, was the Schools Council History 13-16 Project. The project examined notions of 'narrative' held by adolescents aged between 13-16, concentrating largely on ideas of structure, and in particular of sequencing and causal links (Shemilt, 1983; Lee, 1996). As part of the follow-up course, SChP students also were taught how to use evidence to adjudicate or arbitrate between competing accounts, and to determine the relative significance of events within developmental narratives of varying durations and ranges (Shemilt, 2000: p.85).

In his evaluation study of the SChP (1980, 1983), Shemilt advanced the notion of broad, decontextualized cognitive understandings in history that developed in a generally hierarchical and progressive manner. Within the conceptual framework of history as 'a form of knowledge', and in investigating adolescent thinking regarding the 'sort of stories' told by historians, Shemilt (1983) approximated four 'levels of progression' in pupils' understanding of causation in historical narratives (pp.5-13):

- **Level I** – At this level of conceptual development, historical narrative was typically seen as ‘devoid of logic’ and lacked meaning other than that attached to discrete episodes. The historian’s job was to simply write down ‘what happened’, without any need to explain the facts in history. Causal links between events were construed to be as real and true as the events themselves. A historical narrative, at best, is ‘a story that unfolds rather than develops’.
- **Level II** – At this level of conceptual development, historical narrative has a deterministic and inevitable logic. A historical narrative ‘is seen to obey a simple and iron necessity’. Students at this level found historical narrative ‘perfectly meaningful’ and had evolved ‘fairly sophisticated ideas’ about the subject. The ‘inner logic’ is seen, however, as a ‘general logic’, and that the narrative is regarded as an ‘immaculate record’, and that ‘hindsight guarantees the perfection of historical knowledge’.
- **Level III** – At this level of conceptual development, students were generally able to appreciate that events recorded do not necessarily occur in the sequence presented. Historical events were seen as unique due to ‘a complex combination and interaction of factors’. A given story was not ‘taken for granted’ as providing a picture of reality, nor was it regarded as a ‘comprehensive’ one. Instead, students are most likely able to appreciate that an account is a selective commentary upon events. Students realize that causal factors interact with each other, and that ‘the particular context of causation is important if we wish to understand historical events’.
- **Level IV** – At this level of conceptual development, ‘historical sense’ was reached. Students were able to distinguish a story for its characteristic ‘historical

period' and not simply as a 'chronological connection'. They were able to consider facts 'out of context' and reason that an explanation which made sense in one 'period' might not do so in another. Students firmly understood that events and causes cannot be dissociated from their specific contexts; that a narrative logic is context-bound and context-sensitive to time and place.

In distinguishing the four 'levels' of students' conceptual development, Shemilt acknowledged that it was impossible for children to appreciate the significance of what they were taught if they had difficulties in making sense of the 'story' in which events were located. Nevertheless, he maintained that the goal of teaching history was not to offer a privileged narrative of the past ('the best story'), but to explore the concepts of choice and causality through an examination of choices that people have made in different historical contexts (Shemilt, 2000). A more specific investigation on students' ideas about the nature and status of historical accounts was taken up by Lee, Dickinson and Ashby, as part of the concepts explored by Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Learning Approaches) at Key Stages 2 and 3.

CHATA researchers explored children's ideas about the nature of accounts, specifically, how they thought it was possible for historians to produce different accounts of passages of history, and how far they saw such differences as being important (Lee, 1996). An explicit focus also was placed on students developing sophistication in handling conflicts among differing historical accounts, and exploring whether or not it was possible to think of the development of these ideas in terms of a progression of ideas about historical accounts. CHATA's preliminary investigations revealed relatively clear indications of a progression in children's



ideas and understandings about historical accounts. The researchers found that some students seemed to have developed a more sophisticated and inclusive notion of 'knowledge' about historical accounts, and understood accounts as being constructed and not simply a conjunction of facts (Lee & Ashby, 2000). They noted clear 'shifts' in children's ideas about why accounts differed, characterizeable in terms of changes in ideas about the way in which problems with historical knowledge affect the accounts historians produce (Lee, 1996, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2000).

There was also adequate evidence to suggest that some students were able to attribute differences in accounts as direct consequences of the behaviour of their authors. Specifically, students' general views of historians had undergone a marked shift in terms of how they perceived the nature of the historian's craft – from seeing historians as relatively passive story tellers, dispensing ready-made stories or compiling and collating information, to thinking of historians as actively producing their stories, whether by distorting them for their own ends or by legitimate selection in response to a choice of theme (Lee, 1998). Significantly, a few older children were able to refer to intrinsic features of accounts to explain why there may be differences between them, recognizing that historical accounts can never be complete, and that different accounts were created to answer different questions (Lee, 1996, 1998). These students understood that historical accounts were not just copies of the past; they were aware that the task of producing a historical account was one that imposed selection on historians, rather than these 'historians imposing their preferences on accounts' (Lee, 1998). Broadly speaking, students' ideas about differences in accounts can be classified according to the following categories (Lee, 1996, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2000):

- Nature: It is in the nature of accounts to be different from one another.
- Author: Differences occur because accounts are written by different authors.
- Differences: The stories differ because they are about different things, times or places.
- Knowing: Accounts differ because of problems in obtaining knowledge of the past.
- Telling: Any differences are only in how the stories are told; the accounts are the same.

In designing a progression ‘model’ that served as a ‘framework of knowledge’ to inform teachers and educators about students’ understanding regarding the nature of historical accounts, the CHATA team constructed a schema, forming an ordinal scale running from less to more sophisticated ideas (Lee, 1996, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Lee & Shemilt, 2004):

### **1. Accounts are just (given) stories**

Accounts are treated as stories that are just ‘there’. Competing stories are merely different ways of saying the same thing, just as at school where students are asked to describe the same story ‘in their own words’.

### **2. Accounts fail to be copies of a past we cannot witness**

Differences in accounts are a result of our lack of direct access to the past. Different accounts exist because of different ‘opinions’, where ‘opinion’ is a substitute for knowledge we can never have.

### **3. Accounts are accurate copies of the past, except for mistakes or gaps**

Stories are fixed by the information available; there is a one-to-one correspondence. Hence, if the facts are known, there should just be one proper account. Differences in accounts (or ‘opinions’) are a result of gaps in information and mistakes.

### **4. Accounts may be distorted for ulterior motives**

Accounts are copies of the past that can be more or less distorted, and reported in a more or less biased way. Differences in accounts are a result of distortion on the part of the author as active contributor and distorter of the past. ‘Opinion’ takes the form of bias, exaggeration and dogmatism (or lies that stem from partisan positions).

### **5. Accounts organised from a personal viewpoint**

Accounts are not just copies of the past, but arrangements of significant parts of it. Stories are written (perhaps necessarily) from a legitimate position held by the author. Differences in accounts are a result of legitimate selection, with ‘opinion’ controlling the selection that historians are likely to make.

### **6. Accounts must answer questions and fit criteria**

Accounts are necessarily selective, and are necessarily constructed for particular themes and timescales. Accounts are not just a matter of authors deciding to make choices, but are (re-) constructed in answer to questions in accordance with criteria. It is in the nature of accounts to differ ‘legitimately’ from one another, with each account assessed against criteria to determine its admissibility and relative worth.

Although the CHATA team described its progression model as a ‘crude first approximation’ (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Lee, 2004), the schema may be argued to have provided educators with a very useful ‘map’ of some of the points that students are likely to pass through on their way to acquiring deeper understandings about the

nature of historical accounts. In many ways, CHATA's progression model is very similar to Shemilt's 'levels' of students' conceptual understanding of historical causation in that the 'levels' were not rigid, and that movement from one 'point' to the next could be fluid, given adequate guidance and instruction. Lee, Ashby and Dickinson likened the process of traverse as a 'journey' that students may undertake to reach 'a cluster of possible destinations' (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1996). Nevertheless, the researchers cautioned against a complacent acceptance of the current model and proposed further research to develop more sophisticated models of progression that took into consideration critical issues. Furthermore, given the complexities underlying the development of children's thinking, the researchers were aware of the difficulties in developing clear implications for teacher thinking and development from their research paradigm. As Lee had already observed, 'an essential focus for new work is teacher understandings and ideas' (in Husbands, Kitson & Pendry, 2003: p.27). Nonetheless, the CHATA work was criticized for its 'largely experimental methodology' and the difficulty in teasing out 'professional applications of the work' despite the rich data it generated on children's ideas and understandings (p.27). Given that CHATA's design, methodology and analysis were informed by preceding data generated over several years through taped recordings of student interaction in classroom settings, the project may not be described as strictly 'experimental' in nature. Furthermore, the professional applications of the work may already be seen in terms of how these findings may be used for planning and classroom instruction (Ashby, Lee & Shemilt, 2005), and the construction of possible strategies to develop students' ideas about second-order concepts in history (see Chapman & Hibbert, 2009).

### **1.7 Research on students' ideas about historical accounts: Specific studies in the USA and Canada**

Research into students' ideas about the nature of historical narratives has received greater attention in the past few years due to work conducted by history education researchers and cognitive psychologists. Influenced to some degree by history education and research in Britain, a keen interest in these matters has appeared in the USA and Canada in the past two decades. A study by McKeown and Beck on the use of history textbooks in fifth and sixth grade classrooms, for example, found that narrative structures could be a very powerful tool in developing greater historical understanding. In their interviews with the students, the researchers found that assumptions textbook authors held about students' background knowledge and their use of a 'language of objectivity' often produced passages that lacked textual coherence (McKeown & Beck, 1994; Beck & McKeown, 1994). As a result, students had considerable difficulty making sense of the accounts in the textbooks and experienced difficulties in retaining what they had 'learned'. The 'repair' strategies they applied to address the problems indicated that increased coherence of accounts had produced stronger gains in student understanding.

Another study, conducted by Levstik and Pappas (1987), explored the effects of narratives on children's conceptual understanding of particular aspects of history learning and concluded, among other things, that young children were capable of constructing their own intelligible historical narratives and were receptive to historical information. The researchers also concluded that educators consistently underestimated young children's ability to make sense of the past and to think intelligently about it. Their findings were supported by other research by Brophy and

Van Sledright (1997) and Levstik and Barton (2001), who also found that historical narratives can be a powerful influence on students' understanding of the historical discipline. Nonetheless, what remained unclear in these studies was the extent to which students' disciplinary understandings about the nature or status of historical accounts were affected, or were changed, as a result of their frequent encounters with narrative texts in the classrooms.

One of the concerns in utilizing history 'stories' – both in their 'factual' form as well as through 'historical fictions' – was the possibility of 'distorted understandings' due to students' inability to distinguish between a 'proper' historical account and a fictional recreation of events that is not historically accurate (Levstik, 1989). Research by VanSledright and Brophy (1992) revealed that several fourth grade students who had read fictionalized historical accounts seemed unaware that historians work from 'evidence-use rules' when constructing their accounts (in Brophy & VanSledright, 1997). The use of narrative or storytelling, especially when no distinctions are made about fictionalized accounts, appeared to foster beliefs about history that may run counter to an understanding of the historian's craft. An earlier study conducted by VanSledright which explored how students make sense of history when reading expository textbooks and fictionalized trade book accounts revealed several telling conclusions about students' understandings of historical accounts. Three warrant quoting (in Brophy & VanSledright, 1997):

1. Students viewed history as an objective, fact-laden account of the past, with their task being to get those facts. Crucially, students did not know how they might judge the viability or accuracy of the historical representations found

in the texts.

2. Students were unsure about what to do when information from one text type conflicted with another, having learned few strategies for reconciling or dealing with the differences (which they often simply ignored).
3. Students were unaware of the various ways that historical evidence had been treated in constructing the different texts, causing them to believe that both accounts were equally accurate in representing history. When pressed, students chose the textbook as being the more 'accurate' account.

VanSledright's conclusions about student understandings of history were corroborated by Barton's research (1996, 1997), who explained that the de facto 'national curriculum' in the USA emphasized learning the content of specific stories about the past rather than learning how these accounts were produced. He argued that the context and the settings in the USA conspired to obscure how historical knowledge is constructed, and as a result, tended to restrict children's understanding of historical sources and how evidence is used in the creation of accounts (2001a, 2001b). Consequently, students were more likely to treat historical sources simply as information, and not inferentially as evidence for a historical account. In the face of such limitations, the students were not able to make distinctions between texts, and were unable to solve the sort of problems that conflicting accounts can produce in the learning of history. Brophy and VanSledright (1997), however, argued that students may overcome this difficulty if they were taught to read accounts for the 'subtext' that they contained.

In his study on reading for ‘subtexts’, Wineburg (1991) asked historians and high school students to think aloud as they read documents and texts concerning the Battle of Lexington. He found that students had a tendency to read for ‘authorial intent’ and viewed texts as authoritative. Historians, on the other hand, were interested in the subtexts of the documents – the underlying points of view and the political positions of the historians that helped frame their descriptions of events. Wineburg argued that reading for subtext was a crucial ingredient in helping historians reconstruct what probably happened, and why the event happened. He recommended that young learners be taught to read historical accounts for the subtexts they often contain, the indeterminacy of their authority, and the slipperiness of their meaning (in Brophy & VanSledright, 1997). Wineburg also found that students had little sense of how to use the historical information at their disposal to form interpretations of events or to reach plausible historical conclusions. Although the students scored very well on facts about history, they were largely unacquainted with modes of inquiry associated with real historical thinking, and had no systematic way of making sense of contradictory claims. Thrust into a set of historical documents that demanded that they sort out competing claims and formulate a reasoned interpretation, the students, on the whole, were left stymied (in Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999).

### **1.8 Implications for teaching of research on students’ understanding of historical accounts**

Clearly, research on students’ understanding about history, in general, and the nature and status of historical accounts, in particular, has direct implications for teaching strategies or practices in schools. In fact, one of the key findings of the *How People*



*Learn* project (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999) is that students come to the classroom with preconceptions about things that occur around them. These ideas are frequently based on their own limited life experiences about how the world operates and how people are likely to behave. On one hand, such preconceived ideas can be of use to teachers in helping to develop student understandings. On the other hand, however, they can also create problems, 'because ideas that work very well in the everyday world are not always applicable to the study of history' (Lee, 2005: p.31). The fundamental proposition made by the project developers is that these initial understandings must be engaged if students are to learn the new knowledge. As the project founders proposed, 'The teacher's task will be to draw out these pre-existing understandings that students bring with them into the classroom, work with them, and use them as the foundation upon which the more formal understanding of the subject matter is built' (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999: p.15).

The idea that teachers should play an active role in determining students' prior understandings and preconceptions about the nature of the subject in order to enhance the learning experience has been supported by research conducted in various fields. Ball & Cohen (1999), for example, concluded that there is a need for teachers to see instructional procedures through the eyes of their students, to learn how to investigate and interpret children's ideas and understandings and to use such inquiries to improve their own teaching. Their observation was supported by earlier research by Falk & Ort (1998) which found that teachers often develop new understandings of how children learn when they have the chance to examine children's performance in meaningful classroom contexts. Research conducted in history education by Peter Seixas (1994a) also found that a teacher's assessment of

students' prior historical understanding can lead to a better understanding of students' epistemological assumptions about history. This observation was further supported by findings from a study conducted by Barton, McCully & Marks (2004) which suggested that teachers tended to develop a new appreciation for children's ideas and a clearer commitment to their own role in building on that knowledge when challenged about their beliefs concerning children's prior knowledge and their own instructional techniques.

These findings across different disciplinary fields also are consistent with intensive international research conducted on 'assessment for learning' (AfL) that followed Black & Wiliam's (1998) seminal work, *Inside the Black Box*. Eliciting students' prior ideas and planning for instruction in response to students' pre-existing understandings remain fundamental tenets of formative assessment strategies and policy initiatives related to AfL. Nevertheless, concerns over the shifts in students' prior conceptions extend beyond even formative assessment matters to involve wider learning issues, for example ways in which student learning may be influenced by teachers' mental frameworks. Teachers' own ideas about history and history teaching, their expectations about students' ideas about history, and their assumptions about the kinds of prior understandings students bring into the classroom may be important in shaping the kind of 'historical thinking' that the students are likely to develop. On the one hand, a teacher who is clear about the aims of history teaching, and understands a great deal about what there is to learn in history, will see opportunities and possibilities that one without that knowledge will simply miss altogether. On the other hand, however, a teacher who lacks any grasp of what the aims of history might include, what teaching objectives are being

pursued in his or her lessons, and what ideas students bring into the classroom, may not be able to make use of existing opportunities to enhance students' understandings about the subject.

Knowledge of the aims of history teaching play a role in defining the objectives teachers want to achieve in their lessons, with the lack of knowledge and understanding of history limiting their awareness of such aims. In a similar way, knowing the kinds of ideas students bring into the classroom can help teachers devise strategies to develop students' thinking about history. A lack of awareness of students' prior ideas may possibly result in teachers not recognizing certain misconceptions that students are operating with as they try to make sense of new knowledge. As Lee expressed with concern, 'When that happens, and if we, as teachers, do not know what ideas our students are working with, it would be extremely difficult for us to address such misconceptions... Even when we think we are making a difference, the students may simply be assimilating what we say to their existing preconceptions' (Lee, 2005: p.31).

### **1.9 Research on teachers' ideas about history learning and their ideas about student understandings**

Research on the role and impact of teachers' conceptions of history, their assumptions about students' prior understandings, and how instruction may influence the development of students' ideas about key historical concepts is somewhat sparse. Understanding teacher thinking is particularly important as their assumptions and beliefs may determine the manner in which the subject matter is transmitted, and possibly also the sort of knowledge the students may acquire as part

of their school experience. Evans (1989, 1990) while acknowledging that teacher conceptions are crucial to curriculum decisions, lamented the lack of field research on the objectives and goals of history educators. Wineburg (2001), in his review of Shemilt's Evaluation Study (1980), drew attention to the lack of attention given to the knowledge, understanding, and practices of teachers in the project. Though he was doubtful about the feasibility of altering teachers' deeply held beliefs about history, he was clear on the need to investigate how teachers would be able to translate 'sophisticated notions of historical understanding' into their explanations, classroom activities and homework assignments (p.43).

Available research on the conceptions of history teachers has focused on different pedagogical approaches (Evans, 1990; VanSledright & Brophy, 1995), teaching methodologies and issues concerning the desired pedagogic attributes of 'good' or 'expert' teachers (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Wilson, 2001; Wineburg, 2001), as well as how the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of teachers – including pre-service teachers – can affect the quality and effectiveness of historical instruction in the classroom (Wilson & Wineburg, 1988; Johnston, 1990; Seixas, 1994; Evans, 1994; VanSledright, 1996c; Voss, 1998; Barca, 2001; Hartzler-Miller, 2001). Fewer studies have attempted to explore the intersection of teachers' practices and students' understandings (Grant, 2001). So far, very little research has been done that directly investigates teachers' assumptions about students' capacity to understand historical concepts, and their awareness of the 'organizing ideas' students use to make sense of knowledge about history.

Despite these limitations, some research findings on teachers' perceptions and conceptions of history has been found useful in delineating certain 'patterns' (Evans, 1994) and 'dimensions' (Wilson & Wineburg, 1988) for organizing teachers' conceptions about history, and how these might impact on the transmitted curriculum in the classrooms. Evans (1988, 1994), for example, has described five broad 'typologies' – the storyteller, the scientific historian, the relativist/reformer, the cosmic philosopher, and the eclectic – that most teachers may likely fall into, based on their conceptions of history, as well as a combined approach to pedagogy and epistemology. He concluded that the teaching of history in the classroom was very much influenced by the teacher's conceptions of history, and noted that students not only were able to identify their teachers' conceptions of history, but a majority appeared also to share them (1988). Studies by Wilson and Wineburg (1988; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991) which focused on history teachers' knowledge of subject matter and their classroom practices, found that disciplinary perspective and depth of background can have a profound impact on what teachers teach, and how they execute their craft. These researchers asserted that teachers' lack of historical and historiographical knowledge, as well as the failure to examine their previously-held beliefs, may result in them offering historically – and historiographically – inaccurate conclusions and representations to their students.

Other researchers focused on the professional and pedagogical attributes of the history teacher. One issue, in particular, was that of a teacher's training and attitude and how these may impact students' learning and understanding of history. Ravitch (2000), for example, contended that US student misconceptions about history and the historical discipline are largely due to the paucity of training in history for those who

teach it. She believed the antipathy for, or lack of interest in, history among many who teach it, would somehow be transmitted to the students as they teach. She claimed that most secondary school history instructors in the US have little training in history, and as a result, students receive an education in history in which they have *not* learned to think critically about historical sources, the methods that produce historical knowledge, or the conflicting narratives that defined cultural identities (in Reid, 2001). Lee and Ashby (2000), however, maintained that training in history does not make one ‘automatically equipped’ to teach history; good teachers need to understand both history and the techniques of effective pedagogy. Arguably, the chances of developing progression in students’ understanding about key ideas in history would improve if teachers themselves had a clear understanding about these ideas, could recognise their students’ starting points, and had clear strategies for building on them (Lee & Ashby, 2000).

Teaching history is not simply about getting students to learn ‘the right stories’ or getting them to absorb transmitted knowledge about the past; it requires teachers to find means to engage with students’ ideas and to help them make sense of the knowledge imparted to them. Many history education researchers would argue that students needed to be taught to understand how historical knowledge is constructed as a means to develop their understandings about history (VanSledright, 1996b; Lee, 1998; Wineburg, 1998). Research also has shown the importance of a teaching approach that focuses on students’ prior ideas – the neglect of which could result in students learning something opposed to the teachers’ intentions, regardless the efficacy of the instruction or intention. Even then, not all kinds of prior knowledge are misconceptions, and hence, counter-productive to learning; some could

potentially be used to develop more advanced insights. Given that students' ideas about the things around them are constantly changing, a teaching strategy that pays close attention to students' preconceptions about the nature of historical knowledge may serve to help develop and deepen students' understandings in history. As Lee & Shemilt (2004) argued, without attending to these 'clusters of preconceptions', teaching may simply become little more than 'firing blindly into the dark: we may get lucky and hit one of our targets, but we are much more likely to damage our own side' (p.31).

#### **1.10 Situating the current investigation within the larger research traditions**

Generally, research into students' ideas has involved investigations of the 'epistemological knowledge' of history, which encompasses both the knowledge of history itself and the disciplined and systematic set of criteria and procedures used to generate that knowledge (Wineburg, 1997). Nevertheless, such research – undertaken to create historical understanding or to develop appropriate historical skills – has revealed valuable insights into how students 'make sense' of the subject. Yet, while these studies may suggest the extent to which students' ideas and understanding about history might progress, not many could explain how certain variables – such as students' prior knowledge, the thrust of the national history curriculum, the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers – could affect the development of students' historical understandings.

Research conducted on prospective teachers' ideas about history, for example, suggested that the pre-existing knowledge and the beliefs of teachers (that were

often, instinctively, culturally determined or emerged as a result of their diverse academic backgrounds) have heavily influenced the type of history teaching and learning that takes place in the schools (Wilson & Wineburg, 1988; Barca, 2001). In addition, the construction of school textbooks designed to promote a collective national memory to meet specific cultural, economic, social and political goals also may influence the development of students' historical understandings and their views about the historical past (Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, 1994; Seixas, 1997; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Foster, 2001; Wineburg, 2001). Nevertheless, some research suggested that school lessons constituted only one factor of influence on historical attitudes amongst students (Borries, 1997); students are more likely to develop preconceived notions about the past through other influential sources such as the family, historical films, television, literature and visits to historic sites (Evans, 1988; Leinhardt, 1994; Seixas, 1997; Barton, 1997; Lee, 1999; Wineburg, 1998).

These studies have a direct relevance to the current investigation on students' ideas about historical accounts. From the outset, there must be a recognition that to improve the learning and teaching of history, educators and researchers must experience 'a heightened awareness' (VanSledright, 1996b) of the individual's prior historical understandings, and how students develop ways of making sense of history, both as a discipline and as versions of the past it produces (Lee, 1998). Ample research evidence from *How People Learn* clearly suggests that these preconceptions or initial understandings must be engaged if students are to grasp new concepts and information. As such, the teachers' proficiency in the 'subject matter knowledge' of history alone (Wineburg & Wilson, 1988) may not be sufficient. Equally necessary, perhaps, are their 'pedagogical content knowledge'



(Shulman, 1986) and awareness of students' preconceptions. As Shulman (1986) argued:

Pedagogical content knowledge also includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons. If these preconceptions are misconceptions, which they so often are, teachers need knowledge of the strategies most likely to be fruitful in reorganizing the understanding of learners, because those learners are unlikely to appear before them as blank slates. (pp.9-10)

However, as mentioned earlier, while there has been a relatively large amount of research on teachers' thinking or ideas about history, as well as research conducted on students' ideas about historical accounts or narratives, very few researchers have attempted to shed light on the relationships between teachers' ideas about students' understandings of history. Largely missing is research that seeks to draw out teachers' implicit assumptions about student disciplinary understandings, and how far these assumptions correspond with the students' own preconceptions about the nature of historical knowledge. Accordingly, a careful study of teachers' assumptions about students' preconceptions and understandings on the nature of accounts in history may provide educators and researchers with useful insights that would be both of psychological importance as well as of practical educational value. In line with the considerations discussed above, this study was conceived to address two main concerns or aims: first, to investigate the range of ideas students in Singapore were likely to hold about the nature of historical accounts, and second, to

explore teachers' expectations about their students' ideas and understandings regarding the nature of accounts (*See Research Questions in Chapter 3*).

In seeking new insights and generating new knowledge about an area in which there is limited information, this study drew heavily on the preliminary representation of the range of ideas British students held as presented by Project CHATA through their progression model of students' understandings about historical accounts. The study also drew similar inspiration from both published and unpublished dissertation work done in Portugal (Gago, 2005), Taiwan (Hsiao, 2008) and the UK (Chapman, 2009). CHATA's research work also provided the starting point and largely informed the methodology and research design of this study. This investigation, however, went beyond the existing research on students' ideas about accounts in that it not only explored the range of students' ideas but also examined the extent to which teachers' assumptions were congruent with their students' pre-existing understandings. Furthermore, as the study is conducted within a different national context (i.e. Singapore), the outcomes of this research would expectedly augment the increasingly expanding research information on students' ideas.

### **1.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has set out to build the case for the current investigation by surveying scholarly works – empirical as well as theoretical – related to research on students' historical understandings and teachers' ideas about history teaching and learning. The survey has demonstrated the value of engaging in an investigation of students' ideas about historical accounts both as a means to build research knowledge about

the nature of students' preconceptions, as well as to figure out ways to help students make sense of the history they are taught in schools. At the same time, the survey has highlighted the importance of addressing teachers' ideas about students' preconceptions and pre-existing understandings. Knowing about the assumptions teachers are likely to have about students' understandings (of accounts) may provide critical insights that are of practical educational value for both researchers and educators alike.

The philosophical disputes about the contested nature of narratives and accounts in history, however, presented obvious difficulties in explaining or interpreting both teacher and student conceptions of historical accounts. Such debates go into realms far beyond what students seem to mean when they talk about the nature of accounts in history (see pp.141-164 below, for example). Nonetheless, the expanding international research that has so far been conducted on students' ideas about accounts in the UK, Europe, Taiwan, the US and Canada has highlighted certain key ideas about narratives and accounts that are worth pursuing. The current investigation situates itself within these larger research traditions by identifying the current 'gaps' in knowledge about research in children's understandings of historical accounts. One objective of the current study is to offer an initial, qualitative, exploration of ways in which students' and teachers' ideas about historical accounts may (or may not) be congruent with one another. It is hoped that this will allow further research in the future to elucidate more precise relationships between students' and teachers' ideas. The next chapter presents the institutional context within which this study is conducted, and discusses some salient issues that influenced the aims and the design of the current study.

## Chapter 2: Context of the research

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the context and the setting within which the current study is being undertaken. As the role of the state, the stated aims of education and the goals of history education are all inextricably intertwined, it may be instructive to begin with a brief overview of the Singapore education system. To achieve this, the chapter traces the development of Singapore's education system from the period of the country's independence in 1965, and briefly discusses the inherently political nature of education in the city-state. Thereafter, the chapter examines the development of history education within the Singapore context, highlighting, in particular, the manner in which the teaching and learning of history has been approached in Singapore schools. Subsequently, new directions and the potential impact for change in history education will be examined, along with a brief discussion of how recent initiatives may influence the development of historical understandings among students in Singapore. The chapter concludes by setting the current investigation within the context of Singapore.

### 2.2 Introducing Singapore: Education, the state, and the history curriculum

Although a small island (measuring only 42 kilometres by 23 kilometres) lying at the tip of the Malay peninsula, Singapore's outlook, gradually conditioned by its history, has always been global. As an island straddling the trade routes between the West (Europe and India) and the East (China and Japan), Singapore has frequently been

aware that her economic fate is tied to the ebb and flow of international trade. Throughout her almost 150 years as a British Crown colony, Singapore had been able to establish herself as an important trading station, an indispensable strategic possession of the British empire, as well as a fortress to protect the economic resources of the empire in the Far East. However, the end of colonial rule in British Malaya during the post-war years, and the subsequent failed merger with Malaysia in 1965 thrust independence abruptly onto Singapore. The island's leaders, confronted with numerous political contests, also faced the huge challenge of establishing an economically viable national entity amidst an unstable regional environment. Nevertheless, the scarcity of natural resources and the lack of size (both geographically and demographically), severely hampered such efforts. Additionally, the shortage of an educated and trained workforce (that was constantly beset by chronic unemployment), made Singapore's initial attempts at creating 'a cohesive and robust sense of nationhood and economic growth' (Gopinathan, 1997: p.33) rather daunting. In many ways, these developments and challenges to Singapore's survival have consequently influenced her politics and social behaviour (Gopinathan, 1999), and they also may help explain her rapid growth in the years after independence.

#### *A brief history of the Singapore education system*

One of the major factors that supported Singapore's remarkable growth since she achieved independence in 1965 was the solid academic foundation established through a strong education system. Singapore's modern education system has evolved rapidly since the early years of 'survival' in the 1960s and 1970s, so much

so that today it is widely recognized internationally as one that has produced generally high levels of academic performance among its students. The development of Singapore's education system up to the present day may be characterized as evolving through three main phases, namely, 'survival-driven', 'efficiency-driven', and 'ability-driven' (see Gopinathan, 1999; Goh & Gopinathan, 2005).

During the 'survival-driven' phase of educational development (broadly marked as the years preceding the achievement of independence till the late 1970s), the immediate concern of the government was to secure the political, economic and social survival of the new nation. Education was used to resolve the pressing problems Singapore was facing, and the provision of educational opportunities was seen as a device to achieve national cohesion and the economic restructuring of the society (Yip, Eng & Yap, 1997). The colonial legacy had left Singapore with an ineffective education system with schools operating in various languages, each with different curricula and attainment standards that were largely irrelevant to the emerging needs of an industrial economy (Sharpe, Gopinathan & Kings, 1994). This phase saw the opening up of access to relevant schooling in English, which despite its colonial association was seen as an important 'economic language' (or more appropriately, a language that offered high economic value and opportunities for socio-economic advancement). Mostly, however, these years were spent solving contentious issues of language and values education (Gopinathan, 1999). The multifaceted reform measures that were undertaken would later lead to a qualitative consolidation of the education system and succeeded in paving the way for the development of a national system of education which was to evolve in the ensuing decade (Yip, et. al., 1997).

During the ‘efficiency-driven’ phase (which may be characterized as the period from the late 1970s until the 1980s), Singapore’s education system entered a new phase of development where efforts at fine-tuning and rectifying the system were made to meet the national goals and the varied individual needs of students within the system (Yip, et. al., 1997). The experience during the ‘survival-driven’ phase of educational development had shown a lack of clearly-defined goals and was in danger of becoming too utilitarian and too focused on nation-building. Subsequently, in the mid-1980s, there was an increased awareness of the need to have a more holistic approach to the educational experience by aiming to ‘develop each child to the limits of his [*sic*] abilities and talents so that he will grow up to be a responsible adult, loyal to his country, concerned for his family and able to earn his own living’ (Tan, 1986). This apparent shift in focus clarified the government’s position on the fundamental purpose of education and provided the impetus for accelerating the momentum of change in the qualitative dimension (Yip, et. al., 1997).

The current phase of educational reforms has been described as the ‘ability-driven’ phase largely due to the increased focus on moving away from an emphasis on outcomes to a more process-oriented system. Such a move acknowledged the necessity of catering even more to the recognized diversities in pupil ability and aptitude, as well as placing more emphasis on character and motivation rather than academic achievement (Gopinathan, 1999). In addition, a salient feature during the earlier years of this phase was on developing excellence in education (Yip, et. al., 1997), which involved fostering educational innovation at the school level and giving school leaders the flexibility to achieve educational excellence through the

establishment of independent and autonomous schools. Consequently, more than 45 years since independence, Singapore now has a well-developed state education system which comprises primary, secondary and tertiary sectors that provide – as the government officially proclaims – ‘human resources to meet the country’s imperative for an educated and skilled workforce’ (Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1998: p.206) and one that helps students ‘to acquire sound values and develop the strength of character and resilience to deal with life’s inevitable setbacks’ (Ministry of Education, 2004: p.1).

Today, education for many Singaporeans starts at the ‘pre-school’ stage where children are enrolled in kindergartens that provide a structured 3-year pre-school education programme for those aged 3-6. Upon the completion of this stage, each Singaporean child above the age of 6 is expected to begin his/her six years of compulsory primary school education. At the end of Primary Six (or at age 12), students sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), a local examination which assesses children’s suitability for secondary education and subsequently places them into appropriate courses at the secondary school level. Based on their scores and their presumed learning needs, students may be admitted to the Express, Normal (Academic) or Normal (Technical) streams in the secondary schools. These different curricular emphases are designed to match students’ learning abilities and interests (MOE, 2004). In recent years, the secondary school landscape has been broadened with the introduction of new types of schools offering diverse and specialised programmes (such as the International Baccalaureate and the Integrated Programme), co-existing alongside the mainstream Government and Government-Aided schools, hence, providing more choices and variety for broad-



based education in Singapore. Secondary education for most students, however, takes place over 4 to 5 years leading to the Cambridge GCE 'O' Level examination at the end of the 4/5 years of education (at age 16/17). Thereafter, students embark on their post-secondary education. Based on their academic performance in the GCE 'O' Level examination, students are provided with three options: first, to study for a 2-year or a 3-year (depending on their aggregate scores) pre-university course leading to the GCE 'A' Level examination; to enrol in a 3-year diploma course at a local Polytechnic; or lastly, to enrol in a 1-2 years' technical or vocational course at an Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

Singapore's educational experiment has thus far reaped massive benefits for the Republic and had enabled her to maintain her economic competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world. In recent years, there has been substantial international interest in Singapore's educational policies, especially after the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 1995, 1999 and 2003 reports had consistently placed Singapore at the top of the list for students' performances in Mathematics and Science among 25 participating countries, which included the US, England and Japan (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2003).

Nonetheless, despite the high scores attained in national examinations and Olympiads as well as the impressive international statistical scores, there have been growing concerns (within political circles as well as among the general public) about the kinds of students that are produced by the Singapore education system. For example, there were concerns that the existing system has not only produced high levels of competence, but high levels of docility as well; so well-organized was

pedagogy and the administration of schooling that there was little initiative or real decision-making on the part of either students or school leaders (Gopinathan, 1999). These concerns have subsequently led to the questioning of the quality (as well as shortcomings) of students who have undergone an educational experience in local institutions. For some time now – through discussions with teachers in informal dialogues and based on what is read in commentary pieces or letters periodically sent to forum pages in the local newspapers – the general perception existed that the system was producing students who were adept at ‘cramming’ information and reproducing it during examinations, and not the kind who were creative or critical thinkers. Although there had been a sustained increase in the number of students who scored distinctions in the Cambridge GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ Levels every year, this trend may not entirely suggest an enhanced ability among students in Singapore to think critically and independently. Instead, it also may indicate the emergence of students who were ‘exam-smart’ and ones largely motivated extrinsically by grades.

Crucially, the high marks scored by students for these examinations may not indicate a correspondingly high level of understanding of the material and concepts they learnt in school. More worryingly, the larger purposes of schooling and education appeared frequently subordinated or ignored in the pursuit of school ranking and the preoccupation with grades. For quite some time now, the focus on the end-of-year GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ Level examination results and the subsequent school rankings have played a relatively dominant role in crafting individual school policies, after-school educational programmes, departmental initiatives and teachers’ curriculum strategies. Although the ranking system has evolved in recent years to include other aspects of school excellence, examination results and overall academic performance

remain important yardsticks in judging the quality of a school. While these concerns over performance indicators have been a major cause of pressure for teachers as they attempt to meet the requirements of assessment modes and accountability in the examinations, many still view school ranking as essential in gauging the progress of educational institutions as they strive for academic excellence. As a result, students, parents, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders are predisposed to adopt an over-instrumental view of the purpose of education, so much so that holistic development, meaningful education and the opportunity for the cultivation of diversity are scarcely evident in many Singapore schools (Gopinathan, 1999).

Nonetheless, the Singapore education system is receptive to making adjustments to continually prime itself for a reformed future. Despite the apparent shortcomings, Singapore may pride herself in having successfully developed a stable, well-resourced, and centrally-managed system in which individual achievement and the mastery of concepts, procedures and skills have been the stated educational goals. With a common and demanding curriculum, a rigorous system of assessment instituted to monitor student progress, as well as a well-trained teaching force and educational leadership, the Singapore education system is an effective and credible system, capably supported and maintained by a strong state with the assistance of an efficient and knowledgeable bureaucracy (Gopinathan, 1999). Not surprisingly, with the strong presence of the state in managing the educational needs and charting the educational future of the country, it is inevitable that the aims of education in Singapore have constantly been inextricably linked with the political aims of the government.

### *The political nature of education in Singapore*

In Singapore, the school system is essentially an instrument of nation-building. This may be viewed as characteristic of the developmental state where education serves the process of state-formation or nation-building (Green, 1997). In such states, the goals of national development are 'sacrosanct', 'ongoing' and are often couched in terms of 'national survival' (Sim & Print, 2005: p.60). The notion of 'survival' has been a strong ideological construct of the government in Singapore, and 'national survival' has been the 'structuring centre of reasoning and rationalisation of the policies by which Singapore has been governed since independence' (Chua, 1995: p.48). Given the absence of natural resources, the unstable political environment and an internal ethnic diversity that had the potential to fragment, economic growth was seen as necessary to support development expenditure and to sustain a 'fragile' political entity. The development of human capital, as a major factor for economic growth as well as a means of building a nation 'out of a disparate collection of immigrants from China, British India and the Dutch East Indies' (Lee, K.Y., 2000: p.19), was seen as essential in determining whether the nation would 'sink or swim' (Minchin, 1990: p.242).

Education, seen in instrumental terms, was a necessary means of achieving both the required manpower development and the building of social, 'communitarian reflexes' that could bind a state with such a high degree of diversity (Gopinathan, 1999). Significantly, education has been consistently regarded by the government as 'an investment in human capital' (Chua, 1995: p.62). In fact, investing in human

resource development as well as successfully educating her people to meet the rapidly changing needs of the country has been a key, as well as consistent, priority for the Singapore government. Consequently, while the education system has undergone numerous modifications and radical changes, it has never faltered in its aim, that is, 'to evolve an education system which will support and develop the Republic as a modern industrial nation with a cohesive multiracial society' (Wilson, 1978: p.235). That Singapore is a 'success story' today attests to her single-minded pursuit in fashioning education as a tool for economic development and an instrument of social and economic change.

Yet, others have argued that the story of Singapore's education system has been more about the urgency to meet the fundamental needs of society for its survival and development (Han, 2000), and less about developing the abilities and potential of the individual for his/her own sake. Any discussion of educational issues in Singapore must be understood within the context of an education system that is centrally planned, as well as one that is remarkably responsive to the directives of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and its political leaders. Such a system was seen as essential not only to promote economic change, but also crucial as a means of achieving the social and political goals of enhanced national cohesion. Such attempts may be viewed in terms of the desire to transmit, *via* the formal education system, desirable values and relevant knowledge (in the form of 'national education' messages) that may shape attitudes and behaviours of future generations. Durkheim (1956) had described the process as 'a methodical socialisation of the younger generation' (p.71), the goal of which (when seen in the Singapore context) may be to encourage conformity and strengthen social cohesiveness (Sim & Print, 2005) by preparing children for their

roles as citizens within the existing social order and in an appropriate and compliant manner (Engle & Ochoa, 1988).

Nevertheless, for Singapore to survive, education remains an important instrument for national development. Not only is it regarded as crucial for economic growth, it also is viewed as essential to active participation in the goals of national development among Singapore's population (Green, 1997). Since her post-independent years, however, dominant concerns over economic functionality had steered much of Singapore's educational motivations. The emphasis on technical knowledge and specialized subjects that constituted the 'hard sciences' had inadvertently marginalized the role of the humanities in the curriculum and diminished the value of subjects such as history. This unmistakable bias towards improving the 'hardware' needs of the nation – seen as necessary for sustained and successful economic development – had led to an attendant decline in the 'softer' areas of knowledge (Kong, 1994). Hence, while scientific and technical knowledge is widely regarded today as a necessity for continued economic development, historical knowledge can never lay a claim to such an achievement. The challenge of school history today remains that of 'relevance', that is, how it can maintain its place as an independent subject of study in technologically modernized Singapore.

### **2.3 History education in Singapore**

As mentioned earlier, the first generation leaders of Singapore saw that the inherited colonial education was inadequate in meeting the immediate needs of an industrializing country. Nevertheless, like many other former British colonies,

Singapore recognized the economic importance of the English language. The link to English education remains a crucial component in the education system and one may argue that it is in education where the island's colonial legacy can mostly be felt to this day. Yet, a colonial-centric history could evidently not build the common identity that Singapore needed (Sharpe, Gopinathan & Kings, 1994). The local history curriculum that developed over the years was geared towards addressing such *identity* aims, by including largely overt nation-building ideas and focusing on the contributions of the various ethnic groups in Singapore's past. As the means to promote a common heritage by providing the different ethnic communities with a 'shared past' and 'shared aspirations for the future' (Tan, 2002), understanding the national history (conceptualized as collective memories that were crucial to bind the nation together) has acquired an important place in Singapore society. As a school subject, however, history remains largely unpopular and appears to struggle to assert its relevance in the minds of many young Singaporeans (Han, 2000; Goh & Gopinathan, 2005).

### *Curriculum development*

The Singapore history curriculum is a common curriculum for all secondary schools and junior colleges (JCs) and is established and regulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The conceptualization of the history syllabi and the assessment format for the major GCE 'O' and 'A' Level examinations are administered and managed jointly by the MOE, the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB), and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). In recent years, the MOE and SEAB have moved to acquire greater responsibility for

developing examination syllabuses and formats, setting standards, and awarding grades (MOE, 2004). While the MOE continues to engage UCLES in designing syllabi, as well as in setting and marking of examination scripts, the content as well as the selection of topics to be covered at each grade level is crafted mostly through syllabus development committees (SDCs) set up by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) of the MOE. These SDCs usually include curriculum officers from the Ministry, school teachers and academics from the local universities and the sole teacher preparation institute in Singapore, the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Generally, however, the development of the history education programme in Singapore has been influenced by changing political directives as the government attempts to address the needs and challenges of a rapidly changing society. One may argue that the deliberate omissions and inclusions of specific aspects or events in Singapore's history may explain the 'shifts' in the way the history curriculum (and the Singapore textbooks) are constructed. Increasingly, many in Singapore (academics included) are of the opinion that it is understandable, perhaps even justified, for history to be subordinated to the national imperatives given the need to forge a national identity (Goh & Gopinathan, 2005). Unlike in the UK and the US where the aims of history teaching have been publicly debated and related educational concerns discussed in the open, such issues have not received widespread public debates in Singapore (Afandi & Baidon, 2010). For the most part, the government takes the initiative of reforming the curriculum as and when it sees the need. The aims are then clarified by curriculum planners within certain specified



parameters, most usually set by the needs or practical necessities of the (geo-) political landscape.

### *History in schools*

From the national standpoint, however, competence in historical ‘skills’ is not seen as basic or a foundational necessity for education at higher levels. Unlike mathematics, for example, which is a compulsory subject in the education system (from kindergarten level) up to the last year of secondary education (at age 16), history, as an independent subject of study, is compulsory for students only in the first two years of secondary education (ages 13 and 14). Thereafter, the subject is mostly offered as part of a ‘hybrid’ humanities module: in the upper secondary level, history is offered as an elective component along with two other subjects (geography or English literature). Together with the compulsory social studies component, each of these subjects forms a core examinable subject (known as ‘combined humanities’) that a student may choose to sit for at the GCE ‘O’ Level examinations. Students may opt to take history as a full subject, but very few schools provide that option. History regains its ‘independent’ status at the junior college (JC) or pre-university level where it is offered as a core ‘Arts’ subject for the GCE ‘A’ Level examinations. Nevertheless, the ‘take-up’ rate for history at both national examinations has been traditionally low, partly due to the subject’s lack of value as an entry requirement into specific university courses, but mostly due to a widespread perception of its lack of relevance for various forms of work in technical, financial or commercial sectors.

Among students and parents in Singapore too, history is not recognized or well-regarded as a subject that fosters the high-level thinking that is necessary in a knowledge-based economy. Even if some recognized the cognitive value of teaching history to students in Singapore, scepticism remains as to the ability of local students to capitalize on the benefits a history education has to offer. While no formal research has been undertaken to highlight teaching practices in history classrooms, the teaching of history in Singapore schools has conventionally been associated with an approach that is often described as ‘didactic’ and ‘content-centred’. Occasional letters to the forum pages in the national newspaper (*The Straits Times*), and frequent idle chatter amongst teachers during in-service courses, typically depict Singapore students’ lack of analytical skills or grave misconceptions about the nature of the historical discipline. An idea that also receives informal agreement amongst local history teachers was the notion that school history, with its emphasis on source-work requirements, was predisposed to an ‘algorithmic’ instruction of knowledge and skills – without providing students much opportunity to reflect on conceptual matters such as the nature of evidence or significance in history.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, by and large, the approach to history teaching in many schools often takes the form of helping students to master the techniques of ‘studying smart’ as well as increasing students’ proficiency in handling mechanistic structures to answering stock exam questions. Not surprisingly, the understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed and the disciplinary concepts that are central to historical inquiry are usually glossed over in many history lessons in schools. The examination-determined and outcome-driven mentality has resulted in the labelling of history (not unexpectedly) as a subject that is uncritical and

mundane, lending itself particularly to those with good memory skills. While most students are often able to do very well using such approaches, a basic difficulty remains in ascertaining progress in students' understandings about history, and the grasp they have of important concepts lying at the heart of history.

#### **2.4 History Education in Singapore: New initiatives**

Currently, however, broad changes are afoot as Singapore's education system undergoes radical adjustments and transformations, both structurally and institutionally. Of interest to this study are the changes that are purposefully nudging the national history curriculum towards a core programme that emphasizes historical processes and methodology, rather than mere content acquisition. Increasingly, there is a realization among curriculum planners and syllabus developers in the MOE that history teaching and learning should aim to develop in students a proper understanding of the disciplinary aspects of the subject and the nature of historical inquiry. In the face of such efforts at reforming the history curriculum, the conventional form of knowledge acquisition through the aggregation of facts is now being reappraised. The focus is on developing and promoting historical instruction through an (humanities) *inquiry-based* approach (MOE Draft Teaching Syllabus, 2012) which is slated to be rolled out in January 2013.

Focusing on 'inquiry' as the recommended classroom pedagogy, this 'new approach' is aimed at transforming the way history has been conventionally taught in schools. Nested within this approach is the emphasis placed on the development of students' conceptual understandings, particularly on how an understanding of second-order

historical concepts like accounts, evidence, causation, empathy, diversity and significance are central in the construction of historical knowledge (MOE, 2012). Through inquiry, syllabus developers hoped that history teachers would be able to help students develop their understandings of such concepts and equip them with the means to understand and critically evaluate the nature of historical knowledge.

While *historical inquiry* was identified as the recommended pedagogy for the new upper secondary history syllabus, the approach appeared to be packaged more in terms of another strategy (albeit, a ‘new’ one) in the teaching of school history. A concern that may emerge is the possibility of teachers viewing ‘historical inquiry’ as ‘just another teaching strategy’ rather than a discipline-driven and evidence-based approach to history teaching. In such instances, the novelty may eventually wear off and teachers would return to an approach that is more expedient and more direct in getting them the desired percentages or distinctions. This is especially so if changes in the structure or approach of the revised syllabus (i.e. through historical inquiry) is not followed by coordinated changes in the assessment criteria (i.e. assessing students based on the outcomes of the inquiry process). Another danger is when such a time-consuming strategy is not seen to be improving students’ understandings of history in any distinct or discernible way. Owing to teachers’ potentially weak grasp of conceptual aspects of the discipline as well as their unfamiliarity with the means to develop students’ ideas, the use of an inquiry approach may simply count for nothing if teachers do not have any strategies in place to move students’ conceptual understandings forward.

Naturally, it remains to be seen as to how far the inquiry approach could effectively counteract and dissuade history departments from pursuing a strategy of content-building through mainly didactic approaches. Policy-wise, however, this development marks a significant shift (in both intent as well as emphasis) and a perceptible departure in terms of how the architects of the history curriculum had positioned the teaching and learning of history in Singapore.

### *Initiating research interest in history education*

As seen in Chapter 1, research work on history education has flourished in Britain and the United States for several decades now. Such research, however, is still only in its infant stage in Singapore. Available research that had been conducted on history education in Singapore largely included attempts at understanding the beliefs and attitudes of classroom teachers and how this may translate into effective teaching (Lee, L.H., 2000; Thuraisingham, 1990; Huang, 1985), and the relationship between student attitudes and students' academic achievements (Sidambaram, 2001; Quek, 1995; Goh, 1986). There have been relatively fewer attempts at looking at students' perceptions of history or the cognitive processes that shape the historical understanding of Singapore students (Tan, 2001; Koh, 2010). Almost non-existent is research that targeted students' preconceptions about history or teachers' assumptions about students' understandings. Hence, little is known about the prior ideas students bring into the classroom, and how these ideas are shared and shaped in the daily interactions between the history teacher and his/her students.

One of the key aims of this investigation then is to generate interest in research about students' ideas and understandings about concepts in history, research areas that are apparently 'unfamiliar territories' for many teachers and history educators in Singapore. Given that history teaching in Singapore schools is very much reliant on swathes of factual information provided by textbooks, and the fact that students in Singapore are continually exposed to various forms of audio-visual and textual representations of events that happen in history – be it through movies, television depictions, fictional texts, etc. – that might challenge their pre-existing interpretation of particular historical events, an investigation into how students understand the nature of accounts in history is considered to be a suitable starting point to establish research knowledge about the ideas students in Singapore may hold.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter sets out to establish the institutional context of the current study. In the course of the discussion, the chapter provided a brief overview of the Singapore education system as well as some of its salient aspects. The chapter also examined the context within which history education in Singapore has been conceived and some consequent issues that have arisen. A notable development in the history education landscape in recent years was the purposeful move to transform history teaching along the lines of inquiry-based learning. A cautionary note raised in the chapter, however, highlighted the importance of approaching inquiry not in terms of another teaching strategy, but as an important means to develop students' understandings in history. When understood in terms of a teaching or learning strategy that enables students to examine or explore the nature of second-order

concepts in history (such as evidence or significance), an inquiry approach may be seen to provide ample opportunities for teachers to develop students' historical understandings. Nevertheless, if inquiry is understood by teachers as a process of data gathering or the piecing together of disparate sources of information, what is conceived as an act of 'doing history' may simply be one of pasting together undigested data rather than a genuine attempt to explore a historically-grounded question.

Any attempts to introduce changes, however, also should take into consideration research knowledge about the ways students in Singapore viewed or understood the nature of the historical knowledge they learn in schools. Such research remains scarce. Even rarer are studies that attempt to examine teachers' ideas about their students' preconceptions of history and what they conceive as historical knowledge. Given the paucity of research information, an investigation into aspects of students' conceptions of history may prove useful in revealing possible patterns of ideas held by Singaporean students about the nature of historical knowledge. A greater familiarity with these ideas may serve as starting points for Singapore teachers to think of ways to help students build a framework for making critical sense out of the competing stories they encounter about events in the past.

## Chapter 3: Methodological structures

### 3.1 Introduction

As mentioned in previous chapters, the purpose of this study is to investigate the range of ideas students in Singapore may hold about historical accounts, and to explore teachers' expectations about students' understandings regarding the nature of historical accounts. This chapter discusses the research design that was used in the study and the methodological structures that framed the entire investigation. The chapter sets out to accomplish five things: first, to discuss the rationale for this investigation and present the research questions relevant to the study; second, to discuss the theoretical constructs and methodological framework that guided the inquiry; third, to address related issues pertaining to the sample population selected for the study; fourth, to specify and describe the methods and research instruments that were used to gather data; and finally, to consider pertinent issues of ethics in research design, methodology, data collection and data analysis.

### 3.2 Rationale and research questions

The discussion in Chapter 2 (see section 2.4, p.76) raised a key problem related both to research into the cognitive aspects of children's thinking in history, as well as research in teacher perceptions of aspects of history teaching – the fact that such research is sadly lacking in Singapore. In consequence, not much is known regarding teachers' thinking about aspects of history teaching and learning, and even less is known about the kinds of pre-existing ideas Singapore students are likely to hold



about accounts or any other second-order ideas in history. Hence, an investigation on students' ideas about accounts and teachers' assumptions about students' understandings asks pioneering questions in Singapore, and has the potential to enhance the way history is learnt and taught in schools. The results of this study may serve as a basis for further studies exploring children's conceptions of the nature of historical knowledge and testing its findings.

The choice to investigate students' ideas about *historical accounts* also was not one that was made without reference to the growing research undertaken in the UK, the US and in other parts of the world. As discussed in Chapter 1, understanding how students 'make sense' of historical accounts remains one of the key issues in research on students' ideas about history (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Furthermore, an appreciation of the historical narrative has been regarded as crucial to the learning of history (Mayer, 1998; McKeown and Beck, 1994) as it involves sophisticated processes of interpretation and judgement (Wineburg, 1994). Given that students in Singapore are constantly exposed to different forms of audio-visual and textual representations of past events (and presumably encounter different interpretations outside the classroom), an investigation into this aspect may provide suggestions on the possible ways to help students build a framework for making critical sense of legitimate stories, and ones that offer alternative and competing histories.

Understanding the nature of students' preconceptions about history and historical accounts also could be regarded as essential knowledge for teachers and history educators. Research in many national contexts has shown that students' ideas and understandings about history and historical narratives were very much influenced by

out-of-classroom experiences (Seixas, 1997; Evans, 1998; VanSledright, 1998; Voss, 1998; Seixas, 2000; Barton, 2001a; Lee, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Wineburg, 2001). Rather than receiving these messages passively, students are more likely to draw upon their life experiences to construct personal understandings (Hartzler-Miller, 2001). More often than not, these constructions will be based on what is salient (VanSledright, 1996b) or historically significant for them (Seixas, 1994a, 1997). Ample empirical evidence also had been provided by the *How People Learn* project, with strong indications to suggest that students come into the classrooms bringing with them their preconceived ideas based on their own limited life experiences of how the world works and how people are likely to behave (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999). Such ideas can be helpful to teachers, but they also can create problems, because ideas that work very well in the everyday world are not always applicable to the study of history (Lee, 2005).

In line with the considerations discussed above, this study was formulated with the express purpose of exploring the range of ideas students in Singapore were likely to hold about the nature of accounts in history. The investigation, however, sought to also examine teachers' assumptions about students' understandings, and to see how far these assumptions may be congruent with students' own ideas about historical accounts. The research questions found central to this study were as follows:

- What kinds of ideas or preconceptions do students in Singapore have about the nature of historical accounts?
- What sort of assumptions do teachers have about their students' ideas and understandings of historical accounts?
- Are teachers' assumptions congruent with student understandings of

historical accounts identified in this study?

While the focus of the study remained on uncovering the range of ideas students may hold about accounts (and consequently to suggest, as far as was provisionally possible, if students' understandings can be viewed in terms of a 'progression of ideas' in history), there was a strong optimism that exploring the issue from the teachers' perspective may raise promising insights on the different ways students' pre-existing understandings may develop as they attempt to assimilate new knowledge. Consequently, this investigation was designed to examine the phenomenon on two 'levels' of inquiry, namely:

- a) students' understandings about historical accounts across two evaluative moves (i.e. on why there are different accounts in history, and how we can decide which account is better);
- b) teachers' awareness of students' prior ideas, and their assumptions about students' understandings of accounts.

Underpinning the research questions and the research aims of the current study are the theoretical orientations and epistemological basis upon which the research design has been conceptualized.

### **3.3 Theoretical constructs**

Theories can be defined as 'orientations or perspectives that are approaches to framing problems, solving problems, and understanding and explaining social reality' (Schwandt, 2001: p.252), and represent our attempts to understand the phenomena presented to our senses (Mouly, 1978). In qualitative research, this

‘theoretical lens or perspective’ (Creswell, 2003: p.136) worked to guide researchers to raise the questions that they would like to address, direct them to the issues that are important to examine, and point them to the people that needed to be studied.

### *Social constructivism*

The ‘theoretical framework’ within which the current ‘research problem’ was defined has been generally influenced by the reading of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1977), especially with regard to their views on the child as an active problem-solver, having his or her own ways of making sense of the world, and whose level of psychological development can be potentially improved under proper adult guidance or collaboration with more capable peers. Seen within the school context, the teacher’s role in the process whereby the child *constructs* knowledge is one that involves active participation and collaboration, and not simply as providers of learning environments (Mercer, 1991) (see further discussion in section 3.4 below).

### *How People Learn*

This investigation also was very much influenced by relevant research work in educational studies which explored aspects of children’s learning and the ways they acquire new understandings. Of particular importance are current perspectives and insights generated by the work of *How People Learn*, and other research findings from empirical work conducted on students’ cognitive understanding in history. A key principle of learning that was highlighted in *How People Learn*, which also provided much basis for this study, was the notion that students typically come to their classrooms with preconceived ideas about things that occur around them

(Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 2005). The authors argued that if these preconceptions or initial understandings are not engaged, students may fail to grasp new concepts and information, and may even develop misconceptions about various aspects of the subject. The teacher's primary task is then to draw out these pre-existing understandings, work with them, and use them as the foundation upon which more formal understandings of the subject matter can be built (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999).

### *Insights from educational studies*

Educational studies focusing on teachers' pedagogical understanding also have highlighted the importance of addressing children's prior ideas and the need for teachers to become familiar with children's cognition. Among others, these studies have noted that teachers often developed new understandings of how children learn from observations of children's reasoning as they are engaged in instructional activities (Falk & Ort, 1998; Nelson & Hammerman, 1996), and proposed that teachers learn to investigate and interpret children's ideas and understandings to improve their own teaching (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Research in history education also has found that pre-service teachers' assessment of students' prior knowledge about history can encourage teacher reflection on students' cognition, and lead to a better understanding of students' epistemological assumptions about the discipline (Seixas, 1994; Barton, McCully & Marks, 2004). These studies found that instruction that focused on engaging students' preconceptions and understandings provides history teachers not only with the prospect of recognizing and rectifying students' misconceptions, but also with the possibility of extending the students' historical understandings by directly building upon their existing ideas. Some of

these studies posited that an understanding of students' ideas will allow teachers to plan, modify and develop the conceptual tools to help deepen students' historical understandings (Ashby, Lee & Shemilt, 2005; Bain, 2005).

### *Progression in historical understanding*

Implicit in these perspectives is the *constructivist* notion of 'progression' in ideas about history. Progression in historical understanding suggests the possibility of looking at children's understandings in terms of 'sets of tacit ideas' or 'constructs' that allow or inhibit certain cognitive moves that children are able to make (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1996). Progression models recognize the importance of uncovering students' prior conceptions about history, and provide a tool for making sense of and responding to students' pre-existing ideas. As Lee & Shemilt (2003) argued, understanding such prior conceptions is essential if teaching is to correct misconceptions; ignorance of preconceptions runs the risk of students merely assimilating new knowledge to sets of ideas that they already have. Such progression models, conceptualized in a developmental manner and demonstrating the progress of students' ideas beyond the common-sense to the 'counter-intuitive', may assist researchers and practitioners to predict the range of ideas they are likely to encounter, and the kind of changes they are likely to see as students' ideas develop (Lee & Shemilt, 2003). Acquiring a grounded insight on the 'clusters of preconceptions' that students are likely to bring with them into the classroom offers teachers the possibility of addressing the development of children's ideas through a workable concept of progression in history. Such insights may point them to possible 'break points' in the development of students' ideas that are valuable for planning and teaching (Lee & Shemilt, 2004).

Within the theoretical perspectives and relevant educational insights that have been presented and found influential in guiding this study, five key points of reference are worth reiterating, namely, a) that the child is an active learner who has his/her own ways of making sense of the world, b) that guidance from an adult (a teacher, for example) increases the child's potential to learn and acquire new knowledge, c) that children come into the classroom with preconceptions or ready-made ideas about how the world works, d) that teachers need to engage these prior conceptions in order to expand students' understandings and enhance instruction, and e) that changes in conceptions or prior ideas suggest the possibility of addressing the development of children's ideas through a workable concept of progression in history.

### **3.4 The research paradigm**

As mentioned, this study was conceptualized as an exploratory study of Singapore teachers' assumptions about their students' understandings of historical accounts, and how these assumptions correspond with the students' own preconceptions. In seeking new insights and generating new knowledge about an area in which there was insufficient information, an exploratory strategy was deemed as the most suitable means to investigate the phenomenon. The exploratory nature of the research also necessarily shaped the methodology and design of this study. Underpinning the research design and the selected methods of discussion were epistemological issues related to constructivism.

### *Epistemological Issues*

Underlying this study and guiding the research process is the notion of *constructivism*. Epistemologically, the constructivist stance adopted in this study makes the assumption that human beings construct their own knowledge within the context of historical and socio-cultural dimensions in human interactions. In making that assumption, the researcher understands that interpretations are generally not constructed in isolation, but are created against a milieu of shared understandings, language, practices, values, and beliefs (Schwandt, 2000: p.201). Such epistemological position determines how the researcher makes sense of the data, and interprets the findings, as well as guides him in deriving explanations as to how the actors interpret or construct their ideas, conceptions and beliefs in the specific linguistic, social and historical 'contexts' (Schwandt, 2001: p.37).

An understanding of 'constructivism', however, requires a deeper clarificatory discussion on the nature of 'construction' – such as *what* is being constructed, *how* does the construction take place, and *why*, *when*, and *where* does the construction occur (Phillips, 1997: p.153). In the context of the present study, 'construction' was used to highlight the *social* nature of knowledge creation, that is, that such activities are not 'solely individualistic endeavours' but instead, are 'inextricably social' and dependent 'upon the use of social resources' (Phillips, 1997 p.191). On one level, students (while in school) are assumed to have constructed their conceptions and understandings within the school environment that provides them with the necessary resources (such as through peers, teachers, books, inquiry-based projects) to build knowledge. On another level, there also is the explicit recognition of the researcher's role in constructing the students' own conceptions using resources such as the data



gathered and the research questions that framed the study. In trying to understand students' understandings, researchers also are 'involved in a construction process, one of construing their (students') constructions' (Geelan, 2006: p.54). This latter point follows Crotty's (1998) assertion that, as researchers, the assumptions we make about human knowledge (and the construction of that knowledge) are important as they shape for us the 'meaning' of our research questions, the 'purposiveness' of our methodologies, and the 'interpretability' of our findings (p.17).

### *Methods of Inquiry or Research Design*

In any academic study, every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique method, in the sense that it is specifically devised to enable the researcher to achieve his (or her) purposes and answer the stated research questions (Crotty, 1998). This study applied such a philosophy in its approach to designing a suitable methodology to deal with the research questions discussed earlier. The decision to use certain methods of data collection was motivated by pertinent questions such as 'What is the best method I can use to answer my research questions? What is the best way to access teachers' assumptions about student understandings? What instruments will I need to use to get information about students' prior knowledge about historical accounts?' etc. In analysing the data, a qualitative form of analysis was the preferred method, especially since the main intention of the study was to generate in-depth data of a varied kind.

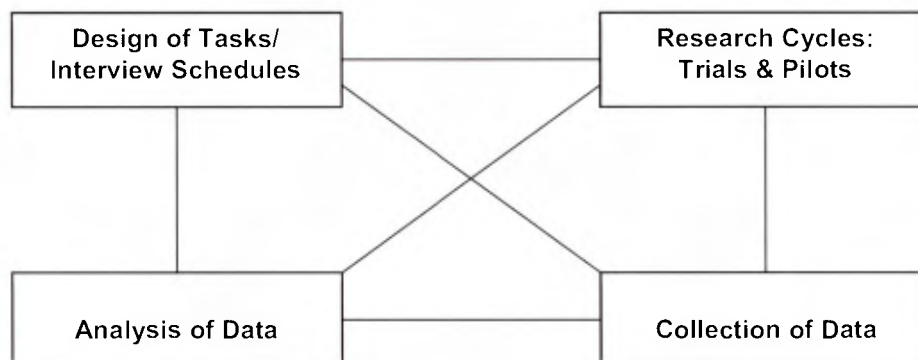
In an investigation concerned with exploring the range of ideas the research subjects in this study were likely to hold, it was the qualitative nature of teachers' assumptions and students' prior ideas that interested the researcher most.

Nevertheless, there are inherent difficulties in such a study: Assumptions are implicit; they are usually made without the person giving much thought to their existence, and in most instances, formulated without articulating them. As the researcher found out later, there was a real difficulty in trying to make all assumptions explicit, especially when it came to finding out what teachers thought about when it came to interpreting the presumably active and continuous development of students' ideas. Even so, these assumptions needed to be identified, as findings from Barca's (1997) study suggested that students' reasoning in history were often based on everyday assumptions about the social world, which they converted into an operational scheme, but which was often misunderstood by the teacher.

However, attempts at 'accessing the minds' of subjects, is often replete with difficulties and complications. These difficulties apply both to attempts at drawing out teachers' assumptions about students' understandings, as well as attempts to pin down students' preconceptions about historical accounts. There was a need, then, for the researcher to be granted the flexibility to make sense of the ideas and assumptions beyond the students' or teachers' own frameworks. Also, the exploratory nature of the investigation served to justify the researcher's use of inductive categories (derived from the data) in constructing patterns of teachers' and students' ideas. The approach taken in this study, then, was largely an indirect one, aimed at inferring the implicit assumptions that teachers may likely have, as well as the tacit ideas that students were likely to hold through an interpretation of the data.

As mentioned earlier, the theoretical position taken in this study is informed by works by social constructivists and by educational research on *How People Learn*. As a strategy for doing research (Robson, 2002), this study was guided by procedures that originated from *grounded theory*, an ethnographic approach to empirical research which sought to build theory from data that is systematically collected from the field (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This process involved using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and inter-relationships of categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the research process, there is a dynamic interplay between theory, methods and data in fieldwork (see Figure 3.1).

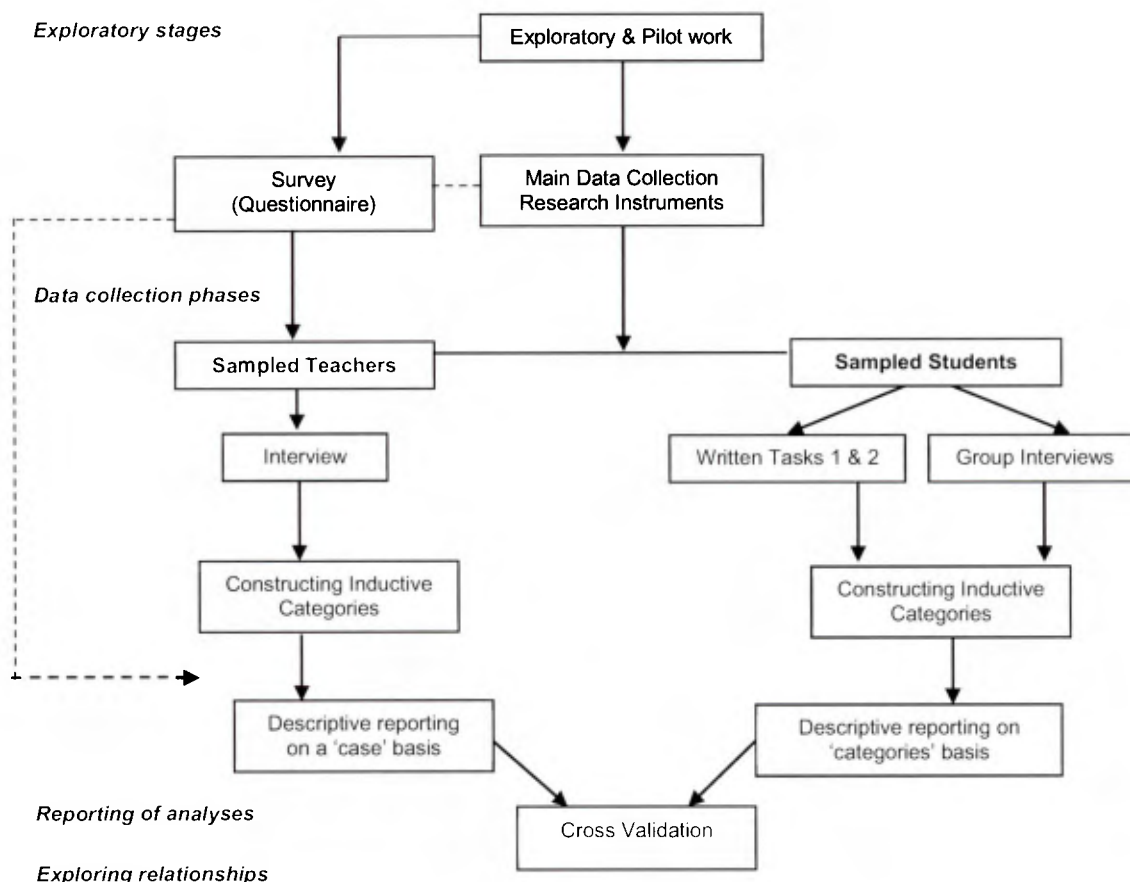
Figure 3.1: Dynamic interplay of design, theory, methods and data in the initial stages of research



More importantly, the process of developing a well-grounded theory follows an iterative pattern which is guided by a set of techniques for ‘(1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories’ (Bernard, 2000: p.468). This study utilized multiple methods of data collection (see section 3.7) which included: data collected using a Teachers’ Questionnaire, and supplemented by depth interviews with selected teachers; and two written task-sets as sources of primary data on students, supplemented by small-

group interviews for the purpose of clarifying students' ideas. Figure 3.2 provides a visual model of the data collection procedures in the study.

Figure 3.2: Diagrammatic representation of the research design partly derived from grounded theory methodology, and incorporating a cross-sectional study of students' ideas about historical accounts



*Note: While this visual map appears to demonstrate a neat conception of how the entire investigation was designed and executed, unforeseen difficulties, conflicts and ambiguities that made up the social and political realities of actual research practice have necessarily altered the structure of the design at various points in the research process.*

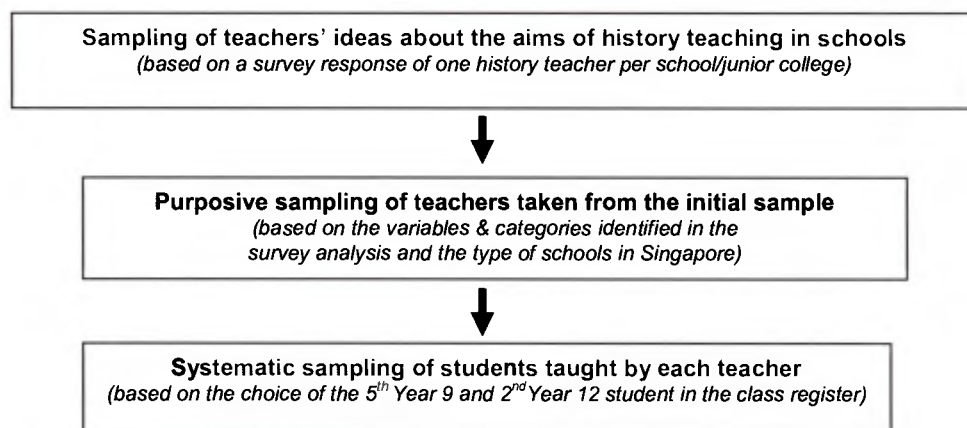
The focus of the initial and exploratory stages of the research was on the collection of multiple data sources and the development of preliminary codes and categories. Analytical categories that were inductively derived from the data guided the researcher's decisions for further data collection. In a dialogue with the preliminary theoretical and conceptual frames, empirical work developed in an iterative fashion -

from the design and trialling of the research tasks and protocols to explore and clarify the feasibility of the data collection strategies, through to the collection and analysis of data generated from the field in all stages of the research. This approach was found appropriate for the current study as it was designed to be qualitative, exploratory, small-scale and focused on human interaction in specific settings. This allowed for a degree of flexibility in both sampling selections and the analysis of data, both of which were well-suited to the exploration of new topics and new ideas (Denscombe, 2003).

### 3.5 Population and sample description

This study utilized a combination of sampling strategies, one that was guided by exigencies in the nature of the investigation. The consideration for the strategies was based on selecting sampled units chosen not for their 'representativeness' but for their relevance to the research question, analytical framework, and explanation or account being developed (Schwandt, 2001). Figure 3.3 below provides a mapping of the sampling procedures utilized in the study.

Figure 3.3: Sampling procedures



To establish a general framework about the nature of teacher thinking across the general population of history teachers in Singapore, an initial sampling through a survey questionnaire (one respondent per secondary school and junior college) was carried out prior to the main study. Out of the 182 schools/junior colleges that received the questionnaire, a total of 93 teachers (84 from the secondary schools and nine from the JCs) responded to the survey. This was a 51% response rate, one that was quite high and unexpected given the popular aversion amongst Singapore teachers to lengthy, paper-based surveys. Initial analysis of the questionnaire data gave the researcher the means to identify the range of ideas respondents had about history, their ideas about historical accounts, as well as their views about students' ideas and understandings of accounts. From an initial analysis of the survey results, the sample group for the main study was chosen through purposeful sampling (Robson, 2002, Creswell, 2003).

The subsequent purposeful sampling of teachers (picked from among the questionnaire respondents) was guided by three main considerations, namely, a) how far the participants' responses satisfied the specific needs of the project, b) the researcher's own judgment as to typicality or interest (Robson, 2002), and c) that the sampled group was deemed as the best source to help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions in a more in-depth manner (Creswell, 2003). To meet these considerations, the selection of teachers was based (apart from their distinctive responses in the survey) on pertinent aspects or criteria such as the teachers' length of service in the teaching profession, their gender, their ethnic backgrounds, and their academic qualifications. In addition, a conscious attempt was made to ensure that the teachers/schools selected to participate in the study

represented a reasonable range of social, economic and cultural contexts of schooling in Singapore. Nine teachers (seven from secondary schools and two from junior colleges) were selected to participate in the main data collection phase.

In order to make valid comparisons between the teachers' assumptions and students' understandings, it was important that students selected as the main student sample group were those directly taught by the teachers under study. The strategy employed here was to allow the teachers to select students whom they were teaching based on a systematic sampling of the 5<sup>th</sup> student (for secondary school students) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> student (for JC students) from the respective class registers. As the study was not designed to locate causal relationships between teachers' pedagogical approaches and their effects on students' ideas or understandings, variables in the student sample groups were not controlled or defined. The total student sample group for the main study comprised 69 students – 50 year 9 students (who were between the ages of 13-14) and 19 year 12 students (between the ages of 16-17).

A summary of the breakdown of the population sample for both teachers and students is given in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 respectively:

Table 3.1: Sample population of teacher-participants

Subject	School	Type	Teacher Description			
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Code</i>		<i>Gender/ Ethnic Grp</i>	<i>Yrs in service</i>	<i>Designation/ Subjects</i>	<i>Training/Yrs studied history</i>
<b>Secondary Schools</b>						
Teacher A	School A	Mission/Girls/ Govt-Aided	Female/ Chinese	11 mths	Teacher/ History, Social Studies, Geography	BA, PGDE History at Sec 2 level
Teacher B	School B	Neighbourhood/ Govt. School	Female/ Chinese	2 yrs	Teacher/ History, Social Studies, English	BA, PGDE/ History at A- level
Teacher C	School C	Independent/ Private/Boys	Male/ Indian	1.5 yrs	Teacher/ History, Social Studies, History	BA (History), PGDE



Teacher D	School D	Independent/Private/Boys	Male/Indian	3 yrs	Teacher/History, Social Studies,	BA Hons (History), PGDE
Teacher E	School E	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	Male/Chinese	8 yrs	Teacher/History, Social Studies	BA, PGDE, History at O-level
Teacher F	School F	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	Male/Malay	8.5 yrs	Head (Pupil Welfare)/History, Social Studies	BA (History), PGDE, DDM
Teacher G	School G	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	Female/Malay-Indian mix	25 yrs	Subject Head (CME)/History, Moral Education, English, Social Studies	BA (History), PGDE, Med
<b>Junior Colleges (two-year course leading to the GCE A level)</b>						
Teacher H	JC H	Govt. JC	Male/Chinese	2.5 yrs	Teacher/History	BA Hons (SEA Studies), PGDE
Teacher I	JC I	Govt. JC	Male/Chinese	9 yrs	Deputy Head (Humanities)/History, General Paper	BA Hons (History), PGDE
<b>Total sample size: 9 teachers - 6 Male, 3 Female</b>						

Table 3.2: Sample population of student-participants

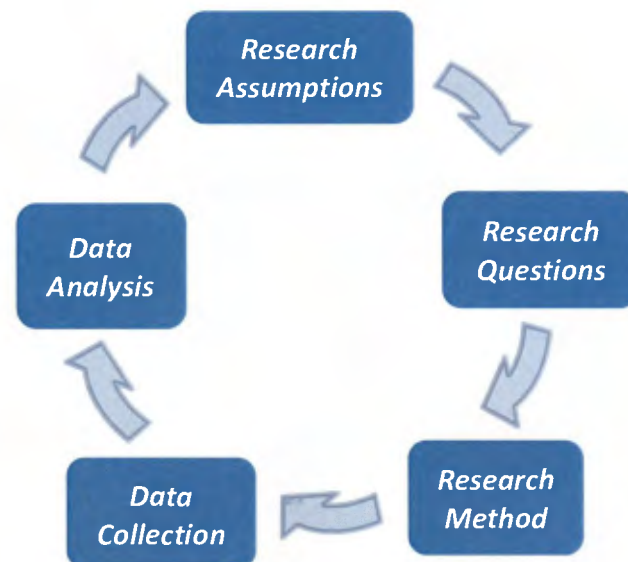
School	Type	Student Description		
<i>Code</i>		<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Academic Band</i>	<i>Distribution/Ethnic Mix</i>
<b>Secondary Schools</b>				
School A	Mission/Girls/Govt-Aided	14-15 yrs	Sec 3 Express	06 Girls Chinese & Indian
School B	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Express	03 Boys, 03 Girls Malay & Chinese
School C	Independent/Private/Boys	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Express	08 Boys Chinese & Filipino
School D	Independent/Private/Boys	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Express	06 Boys Malay, Chinese & Indian
School E	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Express	03 Boys, 03 Girls Malay & Chinese
School F	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Express Sec 2 Normal (Academic)	07 Boys, 05 Girls Malay & Chinese
School G	Neighbourhood/Govt. School	13-14 yrs	Sec 2 Normal (Academic)	03 Boys, 03 Girls Malay, Chinese, Indian & Eurasian
<b>Junior Colleges</b>				
JC H	Govt. JC	16-17 yrs	JC1	03 Boys, 06 Girls Chinese, Malay & Indian
JC I	Govt. JC	16-17 yrs	JC1	04 Boys, 06 Girls Chinese & Indian
<b>Total student sample size: 69 students - 50 Sec 2 (30 Males/20 Females), 19 JC1 (7Males/12 Females)</b>				



### 3.6 Data collection procedures

Following the intention of pursuing a research design and data analysis strategy based on procedures from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), exploratory and pilot studies with small sample groups of teachers and students in Singapore were conducted through three main research cycles (see Chapter 4) followed by two further cycles of main data collection. These multiple stages of data collection (and recurring analysis) involved an iterative process where assumptions were tested, questions were generated, and data was collected, analysed and reflected upon, as part of theory-building. Figure 3.4 below illustrates a highly schematic representation of the complex research process.

Figure 3.4: Diagram of research process through cycles



Research assumptions were identified and relevant questions related to both students' and teachers' ideas were raised. Methods for generating data were

conceptualized, and piloted. The preliminary findings from the data analysis were used to reflect on existing assumptions and inform subsequent rounds of data collection.

The first two research cycles in this study were exploratory surveys of teachers' ideas through a pilot questionnaire and a pilot interview schedule, together with some informal conversation with selected teachers. These research cycles were conducted partly to assess the feasibility of utilizing these instruments as methods for data collection in the main study, and partly as an attempt to allow the researcher to develop an initial framework of teachers' ideas about history and their expectations about students' historical understandings. The third research cycle was conducted as an initial study of students' ideas through interviews and the trialling of a written task-set. The rationale was to allow the researcher to have a general idea of the patterns of thinking that students from these age groups have prior to the collection of the main data. The fourth (pre-main study survey via a postal questionnaire) and fifth (main study) research cycles were the points where the main data for use in this investigation were collected.

In the main study, paper-and-pencil responses were collected from all 69 students in the schools/junior colleges on two separate occasions over a period of four weeks. Students were given an hour to finish each task-set. On all occasions, and in all schools, students worked on their own but with close supervision by the researcher. The researcher attended to all queries or doubts concerning procedural matters and linguistic difficulties. In all schools, both student task-sets were completed by all participants. Group interviews with all students (three in each group) were then

conducted after all written task-sets have been completed. These interviews usually lasted thirty-five minutes and were recorded. Due to the limited time given to the researcher to collect all data, all interviews were conducted once students had completed the second task-set. Altogether, twenty-two group interviews were conducted with the students. The nine teachers' interviews were conducted at different points of time based on the subjects' convenience during the four-week duration. All interviews were recorded and duly transcribed.

### 3.7 Methods & Instrumentation

Given the constraints of the Singapore education system where access to schools is relatively difficult and teachers are mostly unwilling to be subjected to long periods of classroom observations, a few data collection techniques (other than classroom observation) were found appropriate for this study. These included an open-ended questionnaire to survey teachers' attitudes and beliefs, depth interviews with selected teachers as well as group interviews and written task-sets for students. A summary of the methods that were employed in this study is given in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Description of research instruments used

TEACHERS			STUDENTS		
Instrument	Purpose	Method	Instrument	Purpose	Method
Questionnaire	Primary data	Postal	Task-set 1	Primary data	Pencil-and-paper
Interview	Supplementary data	Face-to-face	Task-set 2	Primary data	Pencil-and-paper
			Interview	Supplementary data	Grouped (3-in-1)

The subsequent sub-sections discuss the research instruments used in this investigation. The discussion includes a general description of each method, the

purpose in using the instrument to collect the requisite data, followed by some methodological issues surrounding the use of the instruments in the study.

### Survey questionnaire

The Teachers' Questionnaire (see Appendix-set 2/2a) was one of the sources of primary data used in the study and an important instrument in the pre-study phase of the research. To collect data that could be used to build a broad framework of teacher thinking in this study, a largely open-ended postal questionnaire, suitably designed to achieve the goals of the research (Robson, 2002), was utilized to amass data from a large cross-section of teachers. A preliminary analysis of the results from this initial survey (based on data patterns that emerged through the generation of descriptive themes derived inductively from teachers' responses) subsequently enabled the researcher to identify and select particular teachers for the main study. In addition, relevant findings also were used to inform interview strategies employed during the main data collection. The data collected through the questionnaire was used to generate categories and interpret findings that emerged from the main study (Creswell, 2003).

### *Questionnaire structure*

The Teachers' Questionnaire was designed to have a clear structure, sequence and focus and consisted of two broad sections. In Part A, teachers were invited to share their views about the aims of history teaching in schools, their experiences teaching history to their students, and their perspectives about the present history curriculum in Singapore. This part of the questionnaire was intentionally ordered in such a way

as to encourage the respondent into continuing with the exercise of providing answers (Denscombe, 2003). The questions asked in this section were designed to be open, straightforward, and personally-relevant to the teachers' experiences. In Part B, the line of questioning was narrowed to focus on the key concerns of the study. In this section, teachers were asked very specific questions that were meant to provide the researcher with 'access' to the views and implicit assumptions the teachers have about their students, such as their ideas about their students' prior knowledge about historical accounts, and their expectations about their students' responses to particular historical tasks. In both sections, very frequently, the questions were asked initially in a 'closed' 'tick-box' manner across three categorical scales (for e.g. Yes/No/Partly), but followed-up with an 'open' query. To avoid a situation where respondents were not allowed the opportunity to supply the exact facts or their true feelings on a topic (Denscombe, 2003), as well as to encourage responses that were rich, authentic and complex (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), many of the questions in the questionnaire were open-ended in nature. In effect, teachers were given adequate space to freely explain and qualify their responses in their own terms, without presupposing the nature of the response or having to adhere to pre-set categories of response (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

### *Methodological issues*

There are many advantages in using a postal questionnaire in research such as its appeal as a relatively inexpensive method of data collection but one that offers a wide coverage of respondents, the absence of face-to-face contact with the researcher thereby eliminating the effect of 'interpersonal factors' and reducing the scope for 'variations', and the benefit of having pre-coded answers (used in the pilot cycles

only) that fit into a range of options offered by the researcher that can allow for a speedy collation and analysis of further data (Denscombe, 2003). There were a few limitations, however, found as a result of using the questionnaire:

- 1) One limitation was the lack of control the researcher had over the response situation. For example, it was not possible for the researcher to be aware of the factors that had influenced the choice of a respondent's answer to a question (Robson, 2002), or be in a position to verify the truthfulness of his/her answers (Denscombe, 2003). When analyzing the questionnaire data, the researcher made the assumption that participants had responded according to their own personal beliefs and that respondents' answers were indicative of their views about students' ideas and understandings.
- 2) Another limitation of the postal survey was the inability of the researcher to be at hand when respondents needed clarifications over certain ambiguities in the phrasing of some questions (Denscombe, 2003, Robson, 2002). This was especially true in the pilot-testing of earlier drafts of the questionnaire on small samples of teachers in Singapore. Some respondents appeared unable to answer certain questions – due to a lack of understanding or difficulties in discerning the intent of the questions. Following the analysis of the pilot data, parts of the questionnaire were revised to minimize ambiguities as best as possible (see Chapter 4). All questions were subsequently crafted to be clear and unambiguous, especially in the phrasing and the use of language.
- 3) One important challenge in the use of postal questionnaires was to consider ways to ensure a good response rate (Denscombe, 2003). Securing a balance

between the need for more ‘open’ questions in the questionnaire and making the questionnaire sufficiently appealing to encourage participants to respond became one of the key considerations that shaped its design. While Robson (2002) and Denscombe (2003) have cautioned against the use of too many open-ended questions, the frequent use of such questions was seen as necessary in this study to provide the researcher with an awareness of teachers’ beliefs, perceptions and expectations that were often implicit or tacit, and to capitalize on the possibility of collecting rich and authentic data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) based on teachers’ personal responses.

### Interviews

Bogdan & Biklen (1998) have made a case for the use of qualitative interviews as a primary strategy for data collection or in conjunction with other techniques of gathering data. Qualitative interviewing through open-ended questions allows individual variations (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) and provides interviewee/s with the flexibility to develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher (Denscombe, 2003). In this study, interviews were used largely to supplement data collected in the Teachers’ Questionnaire and Students’ Task-sets, and as a means to clarify the teachers’ and students’ ideas. Face-to-face interviews (Creswell, 1994) and group interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) were used to collect data from teachers and students respectively. All interviews were semi-structured in nature and comprised mainly open-ended questions. While an initial set of interview questions was created for the purpose of gathering data, additional questions arose during the interviews, leading to some changes to the developing line of inquiry.

### *Face-to-face interviews (with teachers)*

The interview data supplemented data generated through the questionnaire, and was mainly used to clarify and describe teacher beliefs, attitudes, and 'interpretive practices' (Mercer, 1991) in greater detail. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, focusing on matters such as teachers' views on the aims and objectives of history teaching in schools, their understanding of key concepts in history, and specific enquiries about their assumptions and expectations of students' understandings. This included discussions with teachers about general teaching approaches, including the teaching methods they used, and their perceptions about students' 'learning preferences' and levels of historical understanding.

The *interview schedule* (Robson, 2002) was inspired by the one used by the CHATA project to interview teachers, and was crafted in view of the research questions that underpinned the rationale and purpose of the study (see Appendix-set 2/2b). Pilot-testing of the interview schedule was done with a small sample of teachers to assess the feasibility of the schedule and to detect foreseeable problems that might hinder its smooth operation (see Chapter 4). In terms of structure, the approach to questioning was similar to that of the questionnaire survey, and comprised two main sections: the first providing teachers with the opportunity to articulate in depth their personal views about the aims and wider aspirations for history teaching in schools, while the second dealt with a specific line of questioning that was intended to uncover teachers' knowledge about accounts, and their assumptions about students' understandings of accounts. Each teacher's interview lasted for about an hour, and all interviews were duly recorded and transcribed.



### *Group interviews (with students)*

Group interviews, rather than one-on-one interviews, were conducted with students to supplement data obtained through two written task-sets. The reasons were largely due to time constraints and the lack of manpower resources available to transcribe individual interviews with all students. The choice made was to have interviews with groups of three students in each school instead. Similar in structure to the teachers' interviews, questions in these semi-structured group interviews were mainly open-ended and started off with a focus on personally-relevant matters such as the students' views on history learning in schools, their reasons for studying history and their impressions about learning history in schools (see Appendix-set 3/3c). These were followed by specific questions that were meant to draw out students' ideas about the nature of accounts in history.

Some questions required students to refer to the set of questions they had answered in the written task-sets. These questions were not simply a revisiting of issues already addressed but were asked primarily for the purpose of probing students' ideas in depth. Indeed, while the group interviews were meant to be a source of supplementary data, they nonetheless were equally important for the investigation as the data proved useful in clarifying and deepening the researcher's understanding of students' written responses. The group interview schedule was pilot-tested twice with small samples of students to check its feasibility. Each group interview lasted for about 35 minutes, and all interviews were duly recorded and transcribed.

### *Methodological Issues*

The research questions that framed this study were crafted partly to explore the assumptions that teachers may have about students' understandings of historical accounts. These tacit assumptions, however, were not directly observable and could not be easily recorded simply by scrutinizing teachers' actions and interactions during their daily lessons. Hence, uncovering these issues would require an exploratory strategy that was best served by in-depth face-to-face interviews, and having access to the informants' priorities, opinions and tacit ideas. Furthermore, as this investigation covered issues that may be considered sensitive or personal, a face-to-face approach allowed the interviewer to demonstrate care when coaxing teachers to be open and honest about their beliefs.

Nonetheless, while the interviews may be assumed to offer a high level of *validity* due to the direct contact that the interviewer had with the informant – hence allowing him to check data for accuracy and relevance as they are collected (Denscombe, 2003) – the lack of standardization (Robson, 2002), as well as the impact of the interviewer and of the contexts raised questions about *reliability* issues, as consistency and objectivity were hard to achieve in interview settings (Denscombe, 2003). It was difficult, for example, for the interviewer to ascertain the truthfulness of teachers' answers as what may be said of their beliefs and ideas may not correspond with what they do in the classroom. Possibly, the manner in which an informant responded may have been determined partly by the identity of the researcher himself (i.e. the *interviewer effect*). In the case of the present study, corroboration of the interview data with the questionnaire data was used to provide further insight, or cast doubts, on the veracity of the interview data.

Interviewing students, however, offered a different kind of problem for the researcher. Perhaps the most challenging problem of interviewing students was the difficulty in obtaining 'access' to their understandings, especially the younger ones (Walford, 1991). As Fine and Sandstrom (1988) argued, it is tempting for adults to assume that we have greater knowledge of children's culture, simply because we have passed through childhood. However, that is often not the case. Even when we are able to obtain adequate answers to our questions, we usually interpret what children say on the basis of adult expectations, which may differ markedly from those of children (Walford, 1991).

There was the need, then, for the researcher to frequently verify students' answers to allow him to be confident about what students wanted to say. In this study, the strategy of conducting group interviews was partly meant to offer the researcher 'improved access' by encouraging students to speak up and interact with each other during the discussion. Lewis (1992) argued that group interviews had several advantages over individual interviews as they helped to reveal consensus view, or may generate richer response by allowing participants to challenge each other's views. Nevertheless, the researcher had to be alert to the 'dominant voices' that could drown out the views of 'quieter' students, particularly those who may struggle to get themselves heard (Denscombe, 2003). This issue was compounded further (in this study) by students who were inclined to moderate their views somewhat in acquiescence to the prevailing 'acceptable' view within the group.

### Written task-sets

In designing a method that could offer a depiction of students' prior conceptions about the nature of accounts, this study was very much inspired by the written tasks that Project CHATA researchers used in their attempts at mapping changes in students' ideas about history. In fact, a decision was made at the earliest stages of research design to follow the CHATA method of using open-ended written tasks to tease out students' ideas about accounts. This decision was made partly due to the nature of the disciplinary concept that was being investigated, where student responses were likely to be tacit. Trying to get at these ideas through classroom observations was not thought to be useful; being tacit, they were not likely to surface in an overt manner where the observer could simply pick them out and note them down. Furthermore, as structural concepts such as accounts and significance are rarely taught in any explicit manner in history lessons, it was highly unlikely that the observer would have the opportunity to observe lessons where teachers addressed issues about accounts in a specific or detailed way.

The strategy used in this study was one that relied on an indirect approach, one that allowed the researcher to infer tacit ideas about accounts from the way students tackled substantive historical tasks (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Follow-up group interviews were then conducted to clarify and deepen understanding of students' written responses. Specifically, pencil-and-paper responses were collected from 69 students between two age-groups (13/14 and 16/17 years), across two task-sets which differed in terms of their *substantive content* (mainly as a means to gauge the consistency in terms of students' ideas, particularly in the way they were likely to use similar ideas across different content). Both written task-sets were designed to be

self-contained, providing students with the material necessary to tackle the tasks, which had been crafted to elicit students' ideas about the nature of accounts. Prior to the main study, pilot-testing of the two task-sets were done with a small sample of students to assess the feasibility of using the task-sets during the investigation and to address potential problems of accessibility, in terms of understanding and use of language.

In each task-set (similar to CHATA), students were presented with two competing historical accounts of a particular episode, but which differed in tone, theme and time-scale. The first task-set dealt with the topic of the Ming naval expeditions in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century (see Appendix-set 3/3a), and the second dealt with issues surrounding the period of British rule in Singapore (see Appendix-set 3/3b). Students were asked a series of questions, framed in a way that was meant to demonstrate their substantive knowledge about history, as well as to explore their cognitive understandings about the nature of history. More specific questions dealt with the concept of accounts, and the procedures or problems that may be encountered in understanding the nature of accounts in history. In both task-sets, questions were crafted in a manner that allowed students to react to historical problems in the same way they would react when encountering new historical knowledge. The task-related questions also were designed to allow students to express their opinions or ideas as openly as possible without limiting or placing a 'ceiling' in their responses. All students were given about sixty minutes to complete each task set.

As mentioned earlier, the decision to tackle students' ideas about historical accounts indirectly was largely inspired by Project CHATA and other related small-scale studies. This was in part due to the age of the younger group of students in the sample group, and partly due to the inexperience of the researcher with research that attempts to map developments in students' thinking within the context of the Singapore education system. Unlike in the United Kingdom, where interest in 'second-order' historical concepts and progression in history learning have been central concerns for the past two decades (Lee, Dickinson & Ashby, 2000), Singapore educators are only just beginning to grapple with such issues. Furthermore, students in Singapore, unlike their British counterparts, do not have adequate experience tackling 'second-order' historical concepts and may not even be keenly aware of them. Disciplinary ideas such as accounts, evidence, causation, empathy, and significance have hardly been regarded as crucial or central to history instruction in schools. For the most part, they served as supplementary information that demanded perfunctory acknowledgement as a basis for understanding historical knowledge, not one that required more direct engagement. In addition, the dearth of research information in Singapore about the nature of students' ideas about history, added to the difficulties of dealing with students' disciplinary ideas about accounts in a confident and informed manner. Hence, the decision was made to utilize, modify and build upon a methodology that had proven to offer a relatively plausible account of progression in historical understandings among students in the UK and other national contexts (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Chapman, 2009), Spain (Cercadillo, 2001), Portugal (Barca, 1997; Gago, 2005) and Taiwan (Hsiao, 2008).

Using an indirect approach to uncover students' tacit ideas through written tasks was mediated also by an understanding that such an approach emphasizes 'the hypothetical and conditional nature' of any claims that could be made about students' ideas (Lee & Ashby, 2000). As structural concepts about history were not directly nor explicitly taught in the history classrooms, there were bound to be difficulties in making claims about students' *constructs* or the way they viewed historical knowledge (not that this was what the research was aiming for in the first place). In the case of this study, student responses to the written tasks were regarded as an indication of their cognizance of the issues; the expectation was that, when responding to the tasks, students would behave *as if it were true* that they believed certain ideas. Any theoretical constructs that may emerge from the research remained hypothetical, conditional, and like historians' reconstructions of the ideas of people in the past, provisional.

In a study designed to investigate students' ideas and preconceptions about history, two issues served as important considerations that guided the thinking and interpretation of the substantive historical tasks used in the study. First, an investigation into students' understandings of disciplinary concepts in history must include an awareness of the nature of knowledge or ways of thinking that are specific to historical knowledge, for instance, the understanding that historical accounts are not simply 'copies' of the past but more like 'theories' (Lee & Shemilt, 2004) or 'postulates' (Bevir, 2002), that are subject to constant reinterpretation. While these ideas are usually acquired through explicit teaching, a specific concern with such issues is not widespread among practitioners in history classrooms in Singapore. In most cases, students are hardly left to ponder about the nature of these disciplinary

concepts. A further difficulty for such research are attempts at disentangling students' ideas about accounts from other related concepts such as evidence, interpretation, explanation or significance, concepts that are intricately woven within an account. Issues related to these concepts are themselves far from settled and are still being debated by historians and philosophers of history.

Second, a key area that should be kept in mind is the relationship between first-order and second-order concepts and how this would impact student understandings. The relationship between the two is hardly very clear, and the interweaving of substantive concepts such as 'empire' and 'power' that reside within a huge range of content that is present in history presents a challenge for the researcher in his attempts at interpreting students' ideas, especially when these substantive concepts interact with second-order ideas. An example of such interaction could be seen in Lee (2005) where students' *substantive* content knowledge of events may get in the way of *explaining* why the Second World War started (p.35).

Furthermore, as access to students' historical knowledge or understanding is necessarily mediated by language, exploring students' ideas may prove to be more difficult particularly for students who do not possess the adequate language competence to express themselves. Although the combination of written and interview responses served to reduce this possibility, confirming that a student meant what he/she *appeared* to be saying remained an uncertainty, and may admittedly engender concerns on the possibility of the researcher submitting interpretations according to his own theoretical framework or conceptual apparatus.



### **3.8 Procedures for data analysis**

Decisions were made during the process of the investigation to select data that was most relevant, significant or pertinent for more thorough and in-depth analyses. The analytical methods employed in this study were similar to those of ethnography, in that the key concern was with the minutiae of what was said and written in the interviews and written task-sets respectively. The distinctive focus in this study, however, was on concerns that were more cognitive in nature, such as 'knowledge' and 'ideas' and 'beliefs'. Also, the explanation of the categories or patterns of ideas were described, as much as possible, using the responses of the subjects in the study.

Qualitative analysis was grounded in the empirical data available and successive stages of analysis were initiated until categories were developed and defined. Data analysis began with a general review of the data collected. This process involved, through the successive readings and re-readings of the written data, searching for recurrent themes, pointing to ideas that may be crucial for the understanding of the phenomena. Data was scanned for potentially interesting or relevant material, and systematically coded to indicate commonalities to a particular category. These codes were noted in descriptive terms and chunks of data were labelled in terms of their content. The initial codes and categories were open to changes and were refined as the research progressed (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the preliminary categories of pilot teachers' responses).

As the codes took shape, the coded data was put together in new ways and comparisons between categories were made (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Certain codes,

including codes that were more crucial than others, were subsumed under broader headings, and the analysis subsequently shifted towards the identification of key categories that were vital in explaining the phenomenon under study (see discussions in Chapters 5 and 6).

### **3.9 The researcher's role**

In qualitative research, it is crucial for the researcher to address and identify his personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the investigation. As the key primary data collection instrument, the investigator's contribution to the research setting can be useful and positive rather than simply detrimental (Locke, 1996). As a former history teacher who taught at both secondary and junior college levels, I am sensitive to teacher attitudes towards student learning, and am aware of general trends in teacher thinking about student understandings. In addition, I have developed my own assumptions about student ideas or understandings in history, and have on occasions speculated on issues surrounding students' construction of historical knowledge or 'ways of knowing'. While these may necessarily affect the way I look at things, I believe that my understanding of the contexts within which history teaching and learning takes place also may enhance my awareness, knowledge and sensitivity to many of the issues, challenges, and practices that teachers and students faced daily in the classroom. In the course of the study, I brought knowledge to the investigation which had been useful when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. As the sole researcher, I was responsible for collecting relevant data and analyzing transcripts of individual and group interviews and responses in the written task-sets. Through interviews with the selected teachers,

I not only gained valuable insight into the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that these teachers have on the teaching of school history, but also about their ideas and assumptions about students' understandings of accounts. More importantly, the framework I have used to interpret both teachers' and students' ideas about history and historical knowledge rested on a sound understanding of the discipline. Having been inducted into the form of knowledge (of history) through my own education (both as a student of history and a researcher in history education matters), I believe that there are basic notions of historical concepts that can generally be agreed upon. The normative nature of education suggests the possibility of changing or improving students' understandings of history; as a researcher, I believe this would involve proposing ways to develop students' ideas from my position of historical understanding.

As a researcher, I also was aware of the bias I may inadvertently bring to the study. During the research process, every effort was made to ensure objectivity so as to not prejudice the responses I received. Nonetheless, these personal biases have shaped the way I understood and interpreted the data collected. The corroboration of data sources, as well as the use of constant comparisons of collected data during the research cycles, may help temper initial formulations I may have to ensure that the categories of teacher ideas and student conceptions were the 'emergent', rather than the 'forced' kind. The survey of teachers' ideas and beliefs about history teaching has helped to address perceived and self-reported attitudes, concerns and assumptions or expectations that teachers have about history teaching and student understandings of accounts. This enabled me to situate the ideas of specific teachers (in the main study) within a larger framework of teacher beliefs and attitudes for the

purpose addressing issues of 'generalizability' within a qualitative research design. The depth interviews allowed me to examine these ideas in greater detail, and allowed for the clarification of points raised in the questionnaire responses. At the opposite end of the classroom setting, written tasks both in open and closed question format were designed to allow me to delve into students' ideas and knowledge about history. The group interviews conducted after the completion of the task-sets also enabled me to clarify, complement, and deepen my understanding of students' written responses to obtain deeper insight on their ideas about accounts. On balance, the scope and depth of these multiple methods of data collection was likely to help mitigate any researcher bias that might have been present at the outset.

### **3.10 Ethical considerations**

In cases of research involving human subjects, it is important for the researcher to seek ethical vetting for his project so that the research falls within an appropriate 'code of practice' (Robson, 2002). A key ethical dilemma that might be encountered in any qualitative study is the need to balance the demands that are placed on social researchers in their pursuit of their research objectives, with the values and rights of their participants that might potentially be threatened (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This is especially important for younger children who may not be able to understand the full repercussions of their agreement to be included in the investigation. Hence, in carrying out this investigation, steps were taken to ensure that the researcher conducted himself appropriately with regard to important ethical issues such as the 'confidentiality, anonymity, legality, professionalism and privacy' (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1996) of his subjects. These included addressing ethical issues involved in the collection of data, in the analysis and interpretation of the data,

and in the writing and disseminating of the research (Creswell, 2003). Some of the issues that were addressed in the course of this research investigation included the following:

- a) Ethical approval for the investigation from the Institute of Education Ethics Review Committee was obtained on two occasions: first, prior to the collection of data during the pre-study survey, and second, prior to the main data collection phase. On both occasions, the researcher had submitted his research plans and the proposed research instruments for the Ethics Review Committee to assess the potential risks (Sieber, 1998) that the study might have for the participants. Approvals were obtained for both stages of data collection.
- b) Negotiations for access and acceptance from the institutional ‘gatekeepers’ (Creswell, 2003) were made in order to gain access to potential participants at the research sites. This process involved clearing official channels by formally requesting permission to carry out the investigation from the Ministry of Education (Singapore), and subsequently, to the principals of the schools and junior colleges. The researcher made his visit to the research sites only after all approvals were granted.
- c) Informed participant consent and cooperation of subjects assisting in the investigation were acquired prior to the conduct of the investigation. Participants (both teachers and students) were informed, verbally and in writing, of the objectives, purpose, benefits and procedures of the research. A signed ‘informed consent form’ (Creswell, 2003) granting permission to proceed with the study was then obtained from all participants prior to the start of the study.
- d) In addition, participants were given further assurance of the voluntary nature of their involvement. In ensuring that participants were not coerced into the project,

they were informed that they were free to withdraw from the research, and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice.

- e) Participants were also assured that data collected would be secured in safe premises, and that access to the information they provide would only be made available to the researcher and his supervisors, and not to any member of the school administration. Implicit in the signed consent form, was a 'personal agreement' (Berg, 2001) made between the researcher and the participants that the information they supplied would be used only in the writing of the thesis and other works that might be produced for academic publication.
- f) Arrangements for conditions and guarantees of participant confidentiality and anonymity were offered. Assurances included a guarantee that all information would be treated with the strictest confidentiality, and that pseudonyms would be used for individuals and places to protect identities.
- g) Participants were assured that, in interpreting the data, the researcher would undertake to provide an accurate account of the information by confirming the data with participants (wherever possible) or across different data sources (Creswell, 2003).
- h) Finally, in writing up the findings, the researcher endeavoured to not suppress, falsify, or invent findings to meet his or an audience's needs. As far as possible, details of the research may be released with the study design so that readers would be able to determine for themselves the credibility of the study (Neuman, 2000).

These ethical issues have been important considerations that have guided the entire research process. Careful thought and planning have marked the research process

both before and during the collection of data phases so as to protect the identity and rights of the participants as well as the credibility and integrity of the research experience.

### 3.11 Conclusion

This exploratory small-scale qualitative study was designed as a comparative analysis of students' ideas about historical accounts with the range of ideas teachers assume their students hold. The primary focus of the study was on the discovery of teachers' assumptions about students' ideas, and the categorization of students' epistemologies when confronted with issues of competing or differing historical accounts or passages of the past. Given the exploratory design and the limited number of participants in the sample group, an attempt to establish formal quantitative relationships was deemed inappropriate for the present study. The intention, instead, was explore students' ideas and teachers' assumptions about student understandings, and to explain any relationship between them in a limited and qualitative way. This was done by asking questions about, for example, the extent to which teachers were aware of students' ideas about accounts, and how far these expectations seemed to be congruent with what students' ideas appeared to be.

Two key objectives of the investigation were salient, first, exploring the range of ideas that students in Singapore held about the nature of accounts in history, and second, exploring teachers' expectations or assumptions about their students' understandings of accounts. In recognizing the exploratory nature of the investigation and the difficulties of uncovering ideas and assumptions that were

more often than not tacit and implicit, this study proposed using a combination of research methods in a small-scale qualitative study to achieve the stated objectives. The collection of various sources of qualitative data drawn from the different schools and junior colleges was designed to assist the researcher in making possible connections between students' existing preconceptions about historical accounts and teachers' assumptions about students' understandings.

The research design used in this study was discussed, including the methodological structures and theoretical constructs that framed the entire investigation, the sampling strategy used in the study, as well as the methods and the attendant methodological issues involved in using the preferred research methods and instruments to gather data for the study. A key consideration underlying the research design and the instruments used were the findings of pilot and exploratory studies conducted to test the suitability of using these instruments. The subsequent chapter describes two pilot studies that were carried out to explore the feasibility of utilizing the survey questionnaire and the interview protocol to collect data from teachers, and the ways these studies have influenced the research design.



## Chapter 4: Piloting the research design & instruments

### 4.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 3, this exploratory small-scale qualitative study utilized a combination of research methods to achieve the stated aims of the research. In applying the grounded theory approach to the study, a key strategy that was employed in the design and development of these research instruments was the *pilot-testing* of earlier drafts on smaller samples of teachers and students in Singapore during the exploratory phases of the research. This chapter describes the initial and exploratory phases of the research and the development of the research instruments through two main research cycles. It examines both the methodological and substantive issues that arose as a result of the work conducted at the pilot sites, and considers selected themes that emerged through a preliminary analysis of the pilot data.

### 4.2 The rationale for conducting the pilot studies

In the context of the research design used in the present study, the pilot and exploratory studies were utilized in a formative manner, and incorporated within the study itself as necessary elements in the process of ‘theory building’. Small-scale pilot studies were carried out prior to the main stage of data collection to enable the researcher to check the feasibility of the data collection methods, and sort out technical matters to ensure that the research protocols formulated were unambiguous and suitable for the investigation. According to Yin (2003), the pilot inquiry can be

much broader and less focused than the ultimate data collection, and may cover both substantive and methodological issues. It may be pertinent to note, however, that the pilot studies carried out in the present investigation were not *pre-tests* – formal ‘dress rehearsals’ in which the data collection plan is used as the final plan as faithfully as possible (Yin, 2003). Rather, the pilot studies were used to shape the developing research design and the final data collection plans.

The pilot studies served a dual function: firstly, they were used to determine the feasibility of data collection methods that would be used in the study. Of primary importance would be the value of the research instruments, such as the teachers’ questionnaire and the students’ written task-sets, in allowing the researcher to obtain the kind of data that would be crucial for the study. Secondly, the pilot studies were designed to enable the researcher to familiarize himself with the substantive issues inherent in an exploratory research of this nature, where teachers’ assumptions about students’ ideas were mostly implicit and where students’ ideas and understandings about history were likely to be tacit. Data collected from the pilot studies provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore and develop initial frameworks and theoretical conceptions of teachers’ assumptions, as well as students’ ideas about historical accounts.

#### **4.3 The research cycles**

The initial stage of this research took the form of *research cycles* that were designed to explore and clarify the nature and scope of the study, as well as to generate ‘raw’ data that were (as far as possible) not unduly shaped by prior concepts or theories. A

strategy of ‘open sampling’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was employed in the choice of the field sites, and groups or individuals were selected initially based on their ‘relevance’ to the investigation. Nevertheless, due to the multiple instruments that were used in this study and the difficulties in getting access to both teachers and students, pilot testing of instruments was conducted only once per cycle, but after several informal exploratory conversations with teachers and students. In the present study, five main research cycles were conducted (see Table 4.1) with pilot studies comprising the main component in the first three research cycles. Due to space constraints, the following sub-sections briefly describe the methodological and substantive issues which arose out of the piloting of **only** the research instruments for use with teachers (in Research Cycles 1 & 2).

Table 4.1: Research cycles for exploratory/pilot studies and main data collection

Phase	Research Cycles/ Tasks	Participants	Time/ Period
	<i>Exploratory conversations with teachers on their ideas about students' ideas</i>	3 secondary and JC teachers	Dec 2003
<i>Pilot 1</i>	<b>Research Cycle 1</b> - Piloting the Teachers' Questionnaire <i>Exploratory conversations with students and teachers on their ideas about history &amp; accounts</i>	6 secondary school & JC teachers  6 secondary two & 3 JC1 students	April 2004
<i>Pilot 2</i>	<b>Research Cycle 2</b> - Piloting the Interview Schedule for teachers <i>Exploratory conversations with students on their ideas about history &amp; accounts</i>	4 secondary school & JC teachers	August 2004
<i>Pilot 3</i>	<b>Research Cycle 3</b> - Piloting the Interview Schedule for students - Piloting the Task-set & critique of Task-set by students	30 secondary two students 7 JC1 students	January - February 2005
<i>Pre-study Survey</i>	<b>Research Cycle 4</b> - Survey of Teachers' Ideas via the Questionnaire	Questionnaire sent to: 164 secondary school & 18 JC teachers	March - July 2005
<i>Main Data</i>	<b>Research Cycle 5</b> - Collection of main data in seven secondary schools and two JCs	9 teachers 69 students (50 secondary two & 19 JC1 students)	April – July 2006

### *Research Cycles 1 and 2 (Pilots)*

In these research cycles, the draft Teachers' Questionnaire (Cycle 1) and Interview Schedule (Cycle 2) were pilot-tested to address methodological issues such as the suitability of the questions asked, and the flexibility afforded to respondents when responding to questions and when qualifying answers. Of vital importance was the objective of testing the 'open-ended' nature of questions, especially with regard to how at ease respondents were when tackling such questions, as well as aspects that may prove to be difficult for respondents to answer. These were some of the issues arising:

*Some design issues relating to the questionnaire (please refer to Pilot Questionnaire in Appendix-set 1/1c for examples)*

1. While the pilot questionnaire managed to capture several interesting aspects of teachers' beliefs about history and their students' ideas, there was a need to tighten the line of inquiry to the main areas of investigation and to keep the data manageable and focused. In the final version (see *Teachers' Questionnaire* in Appendix-set 2/2a), a stronger focus on the key areas of the study was reflected in the (re-)drawing of the questionnaire into two sections: the first dealt with general issues that sought to draw out teachers' views about history education in Singapore, and the second comprised explicit questions meant to get teachers to share their ideas and assumptions about their students' understandings of accounts.
2. The responses also indicated that some questions (in the pilot questionnaire) appeared to have restricted teachers in expressing their views about particular issues and seemed to steer teachers' responses to the way the researcher

‘sees’ things (for example, Q4, Q5 and Q13). Other questions also ran the risk of polarizing issues as they forced teachers to respond in an ‘either/or’ manner or in a binary ‘Yes/No’ fashion. In the final version, the line of questioning for many questions was changed to allow respondents greater flexibility to respond, with follow-up questions used to encourage them to explain their answers.

3. Some questions in the pilot questionnaire (Q13, for example) were especially difficult for respondents to answer, and the responses even harder for the researcher to analyze. The issue that emerged was the extent to which responses were reflective of the respondent’s beliefs, given that the choices were *provided* for the respondent rather than specified by him/her in writing and in an open-ended manner. In the final version, the question was revised and broken up into three mostly open-ended items (Q1, Q6, & Q7) in the *Teachers’ Questionnaire* to allow teachers to express their beliefs about the goals of history teaching *in their own words*.
4. Another important outcome of the piloting was that teachers’ responses did not provide adequate data that revealed their ideas about students’ understandings of accounts. Responses to the pilot questionnaire on accounts (in Q22, Q23&Q24) did not allow for much inference about respondents’ implicit assumptions about their students’ ideas. A re-reading of the responses suggested that more specific questions designed to tease out teachers’ ideas about students’ understandings of accounts were needed. In the final version, three more questions (Q8, Q9&Q11) were crafted and added to the (slightly amended) existing questions.

Overall, the researcher concluded that the questionnaire would be a useful instrument to gather data on teachers' beliefs and perceptions about history education in Singapore, and their ideas about students' understandings of accounts. The expected responses would be important in three ways: first, as a means to develop a broad mapping of teachers' beliefs, attitudes and mental frames about history; second, as a 'sampling frame' from which a purposive sampling of teachers could be made for the main study; and third, as the primary data to develop a preliminary framework of teachers' thinking about students' ideas about accounts which could be further explored using the interview data.

*Some design issues for the interview schedule (pilot schedule in Appendix-set 1/1d)*

1. One issue that emerged from the analysis of interview data from the second pilot was the need for clarity in terms of the questioning and the use of probing questions to elicit a more detailed response. Based on the recorded interviews, there were several times when the researcher had to rephrase a question more than once as the interviewee was not clear as to what was being asked. At other times, the interviewee was the *one* asking the 'probing questions' to clarify the issue being discussed as the questions seemed vague or ambiguous. Post-interview discussions with two interviewed teachers enabled the researcher to obtain feedback on ways to improve the clarity of the questions. These brief feedback sessions were used to sort out questions in the interview schedule that had given teachers the most problems. The interview transcripts were also analyzed to identify questions which had appeared to yield little or ambiguous data. These questions were marked out, and modifications (in the form of possible probing questions) were included

in the final interview schedule (see Appendix-set 2/2b).

2. Another point related to questioning technique was that interviewees seemed unlikely to respond well when asked 'direct' questions about their ideas regarding students' understandings. Questions like 'What are your assumptions about your students' understandings about historical accounts?' did not yield insightful data. A reading of the interview transcripts showed that teachers were generally guarded in their responses and were reluctant to respond to such questions or others that were asked directly. The step taken to address this issue was to phase the interview schedule into two sections: in the first section, open questions about the aims of history teaching were asked, with emphasis on teachers' tacit assumptions about history education; in the next section, sequential questions asked in an exploratory manner were used to get at teachers' assumptions about students' ideas. This took the form of a series of questions that asked interviewees to speculate about what their students would do or say when handling multiple accounts, such as:

*Do you believe that your students will come into contact with different versions of the past in the outside world? How do you suppose they will make sense of the differences then? What sort of ideas do you think they will work with to sort out the differences? Or do you think they'll just end up confused?*

The experience from the pilot interviews showed difficulties in getting at the assumptions teachers may have about their students, or how these mental structures may affect the way they relate to their students. A possible way of getting further perspectives on the interview data would be to conduct observations as well as pre/post interviews with the teachers. However, given the constraints of the

Singapore system – such as schools’ reluctance to admit researchers and teachers’ own reticence at being observed – it was not possible for the researcher to use that approach. The data generated by the pilot interviews, however, were found to be rich and useful enough to supplement the data collected in the survey.

*Preliminary findings on teachers’ ideas about students’ understandings*

One of the things that became clear to the researcher upon completing data collection from both pilot studies, and subsequently reflecting on the ideas that emerged out of that experience, was the difference between the perspectives of the teacher and those of the researcher concerning the value of an academic enquiry into students’ ideas about the nature of history and historical accounts. Teachers were generally concerned with practical knowledge that they could use to better understand the problems they faced in their everyday experiences. Any classroom research, in this sense, should fulfil this practical need of theirs. An academic enquiry that focused on abstract and tacit issues such as ‘beliefs’, ‘expectations’ or ‘assumptions’ that were taken-for-granted (due to their abstract nature) seemed to dispute the teacher’s notion of what counted as useful knowledge. Nonetheless, as Nash (1976) argued, research into ‘attitudes’, ‘perceptions’ or ‘expectations’ is all essentially concerned with the same problem: how teachers relate to pupils on the basis of a model they have of what pupils may be. Research on the frameworks teachers may employ in understanding their students’ ideas and understandings has very direct pedagogic relevance to teachers as such studies would be pertinent knowledge if teachers were to understand their students better (see *How People Learn*, Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999).



The next few paragraphs are essentially limited to discussing selected coding structures and preliminary findings about teachers' tacit ideas concerning their students' understandings of accounts based on the two pilot studies that were conducted. At this stage of the study, the results were preliminary as thoughts regarding the key aspects of the investigation were, evidently, in their gestation stage.

*a) Teachers' views on students' understandings of history*

One interesting outcome of both pilots was the notion that teachers tended to mostly hide their assumptions about students' understandings. Either they said that they did not have any assumptions or that they should not have any, in case they might be seen as being prejudicial towards their students. Preliminary analysis of both questionnaire data and interview transcripts also seemed to suggest that most (if not all) teachers were not exactly sure what was meant by 'preconceptions' or 'prior ideas'. For the most part, they believed that students' prior knowledge about history was the typical, stereotyped response that students usually give them when asked what history is, i.e. that history is about the past, or that it is boring and dull, etc. These responses alerted the researcher to the need to probe the teachers' assumptions about their students' ideas more fully. This led the researcher to develop a questioning strategy (in the main study) that addressed these implicit assumptions beyond such immediate or stereotypical responses.

Another aspect that was difficult to ascertain was whether teachers do give considerable attention (or even the slightest concern) as to whether their students come into the classroom with preconceived ideas about history or the nature of the

historical discipline. In many cases, attempts to confidently draw out these implicit assumptions about students' pre-existing knowledge proved difficult. In general, however, it seemed that teachers did (whether they were conscious of their own ideas) have certain assumptions about their students' understandings of history. However, beyond the apparent comments about students' negative perceptions about the subject, none ventured to comment on the 'ready-made' frameworks that students may have about the discipline. Table 4.2 below provides an illustration of some ideas teachers in the pilots appeared to hold when asked about students' 'preconceptions' in history:

Table 4.2: Proposed coding scheme on teachers' ideas about students' understandings of history

<b>First-order category (area of concern)</b>	<b>Second-order category (description of the code)</b>	<b>Code abbreviation</b>
History for exams	History as a subject to study for exams, no more than that	HIS_EX_1
	There is a "model answer" to every question set in a history test/exam that can be found in the textbook/notes	HIS_EX_2
	***	***
Misconceptions about history, the subject	History is rote-learning of facts & dates/a purely 'memory subject'/superior memory skills a prerequisite for good grades	MIS_SUB_1
	History is a subject that is difficult to score and has low economic value	MIS_SUB_2
	History is a subject for low achievers and the "academically-weak"	MIS_SUB_3
Negative perception of history	History as 'dry' and 'obsolete'	NEG_PER_1
	History as 'irrelevant' and 'impractical' for the present and the future	NEG_PER_2
	History is 'worthless' when compared to Maths and Science	NEG_PER_3
	***	***

An analytical approach that was taken in reviewing the teachers' ideas in both research cycles was to organize teachers' interpreted questionnaire and interview

responses into broad categories that indicated the extent to which they were aware of their students' prior ideas. Two broad categories were used to distinguish teachers' assumptions about students' prior ideas: **Unreflective** and **Reflective**. The sub-categories of responses are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Preliminary categories and sub-categories indicating teachers' awareness of students' prior ideas about history

Category	Sub-category
<b>Unreflective</b>	1. Teachers did not have any ideas about students' preconceptions. They did not see knowledge of students' prior ideas as a useful concern in daily teaching.
	2. Teachers assumed that students did not have any prior ideas about history. They did not see students as having any useful ideas about history or the past.
	3. Teachers assumed that students have some ideas about history but these were typically deficit responses that were not useful and arose out of students' negative perceptions about the subject.
<b>Reflective</b>	1. Teachers acknowledged that students have prior conceptions about history and the past. But these initial ideas were likely to be simplistic at best.
	2. Teachers seemed aware that students may have a range of prior ideas about history and the past. These were viewed as possibly useful to help students build new ideas.

Another point that came across quite prominently in the two pilot studies was the strong tendency to rely on everyday affairs as the most useful examples that will allow students to better understand the history that was taught, or used as a key strategy to overcome students' difficulties in understanding certain aspects of the history they learned in school. While evidence from research in many national contexts has suggested that using everyday examples to enhance historical understanding can be – if the dangers are not taken into account – problematic due to history's counter-intuitive nature (Lee, 1999; Lee & Shemilt, 2003), many of the

teachers interviewed believe that this was the best way to get students to see things clearly. For many, there was a strong belief that students could be made to understand complex issues in history if they were given 'real-life' examples or familiar analogies that may situate students' thinking within a recognizable context. For example, when asked how we can explain 'why there are several differing accounts of the same historical event', a teacher wrote:

Use an everyday example - i.e. Peter was fighting with Sam in class. Peter, Sam and several witnesses (of Peter's and Sam's gangs) were called to give an account of the incident, etc. Then relate back to the historical event.

In a similar vein, another respondent wrote:

Perhaps I will use the analogy of a car accident - that the accident is described differently depending on the one who is describing it - the driver, a bystander, the victim.

While these approaches may provide students with an idea of how multiple perspectives may work in everyday life, the problem would emerge once students began asking questions like: 'How can we know which one to believe? How can we know which one is the better or accurate or more "truthful" account?' For most teachers interviewed, the basic answer to these questions was 'All these accounts are acceptable because different people have different perspectives and opinions'.

The reasons for the difficulties that students encountered in history, however, were attributed more to their limited abilities or proficiencies in certain key 'skills' or on their 'intellectual maturity' (as well as on the complexity of the subject), than to any

deficiencies on the part of the teachers' explanations. In many instances, the strength of students' prior ideas and pre-existing understandings were under-estimated by many teachers. From evidence drawn from questionnaire responses and the pilot interviews, the picture that emerged was one of 'student-centred' deficits that were used to explain students' difficulties in history.

*b) On teachers' ideas about accounts and assumptions about students' understandings*

Pilot data analysis seemed to indicate that for the most part, teachers were not too sure about their students' understandings of the nature of accounts in history. There was evidence to suggest that teachers did not regard a clear understanding of historical accounts as necessary knowledge that students must be specifically equipped with. There were several reasons for such thinking. First, as knowledge about historical accounts was not tested in any tests or examinations, there was no urgent need to examine these issues at length. Furthermore, the teaching of such knowledge was not a requirement in the syllabus, nor did it figure prominently in the content knowledge that needed to be taught. Consequently, the nature of *accounts* and other disciplinary understandings in history remained of secondary importance for history instruction in schools and were usually dealt with (if at all) in the first two introductory lessons on history. For some teachers, the fact that they had already covered issues like evidence, accounts, interpretation, etc. in these two lessons meant that 'students are informed of such issues, and therefore they should know'.

Interestingly, even among the most experienced of teachers, there appeared to be a hazy conceptual understanding of the nature and status of accounts in history. When

asked how they supposed historical accounts are constructed, for example, this was what a teacher had to say:

**Interviewee 1:** How are they constructed? Err... I think mainly by what the government chooses to get from, what do they call that place... the national archives? Get it from bits and pieces in the textbooks. So the bulk of the syllabus, whatever appears, is what they want us to..., you know, what they feel comfortable with.

Such apparent unfamiliarity with the nature of accounts amongst Singapore teachers may largely be due to the fact that the term 'historical account' was used more as a *descriptive* term rather than understood in *conceptual* terms. It was simply a term that they seldom use in their daily instruction in the classroom. In one sense, this may show that teachers were not aware of the kind of understandings such a concept entails, but it also may be possible that these teachers would surely understand what 'accounts' are if they were to work with the same sort of definitions that the researcher was using. There was a need then for the interview schedule to be re-formulated such that both the researcher and the teacher-interviewees could speak about the topic on similar conceptual lines.

More interestingly, though, teacher assumptions about students' ideas regarding the nature of historical accounts tended to be rather varied, but not in an extensive manner. For the most part, there was clear evidence that teachers had not thought much about the issue at all, but when pressed, some gave tentative comments about possible kinds of ideas their students' may be working with when making sense of accounts. Generally, however, teachers believed that students' understandings and preconceptions about historical accounts required developing. Very few were of the

opinion that students' understanding of accounts was adequate, while fewer still were positive about the possibility of changing pre-existing conceptions. Based on preliminary analysis, the tentative coding scheme illustrated in Table 4.3 below may be used as an initial model to investigate teachers' ideas about students' understandings of accounts.

Table 4.4: Proposed coding scheme on teachers' ideas about students' preconceptions about accounts

<b>First-order category (area of concern)</b>	<b>Second-order category (description of the code)</b>	<b>Code abbreviation</b>
<b>No clue at all</b>	Don't know/Have not thought about whether students have preconceptions about accounts	NO_CLU_1
	Have not been long in the service to know	NO_CLU_2
	Would rather not have any preconceptions about students' ideas	NO_CLU_3
	***	***
<b>No understanding of accounts</b>	Students' lack capacity to understand the nature of accounts	NO_UND_1
	Students' view history as a subject for learning rather than accounts of events	NO_UND_2
	Face value and superficial acceptance of what is read	NO_UND_3
	***	***
<b>Limited understanding of accounts</b>	Simplistic view that textbook accounts are unquestioned truths	LIM_UND_1
	All historical accounts are true and absolute	LIM_UND_2
	There is only one true version of history	LIM_UND_3
	***	***
<b>Adequate understanding of accounts</b>	Aware that evidence is required to support a view in an account	AD_UND_1
	Developed the ability to not accept accounts or interpretations at face value	AD_UND_2
	Students can understand the diversity of accounts if this is emphasized to them	AD_UND_3
	***	***

A key explanation that some teachers would expect some students to give when explaining the differences between accounts rested largely with author-related aspects of these accounts. While it may be possible to establish different categories

to analyze the nature of teachers' responses regarding authorship issues, a striking point was the emphasis given to the role of the historian as the main determinant that may explain differences between accounts. The combined responses to Q24 in the pilot questionnaire, for example, highlighted this aspect:

*Q24: Why are there two different accounts explaining the end of the Tang dynasty? Leaving aside any reading or language problems, what would you expect your a) able students, b) average students, and c) less able students to say in response to the Question?*

<b><i>The able student says:</i></b>	<b><i>The average student says:</i></b>	<b><i>The less able student says:</i></b>
Different ways historians used historical concepts Different definitions used Different emphasis placed on causes Different sets of reasons used to explain the event	Different interpretations by both historians Different accounts by two different people Different factors highlighted	Lack of accuracy in one historian's account Inability of historians to agree One of the historians made a mistake One of the historians is lying

As the grouped responses above demonstrated, the teachers in the pilot study appeared to indicate certain expected 'moves' their students were likely to make when explaining different accounts about the end of the Tang dynasty. Even if 'the historian' was commonly seen as bearing primary responsibility for accounts being different, the 'able student' was expected to exercise some kind of *critical* judgement as part of arbitrating between accounts. The criteria ranged from the 'conceptual' way different historians defined or interpreted 'the end' of the Tang dynasty in their accounts, to the different emphasis each historian placed on the causes or reasons to explain the event. The 'average student' was expected to highlight the *multiple origins* of the accounts where the issue of 'difference' was attributed to distinct or 'unique' individuals/authors. These students were assumed to be able to explain different accounts in terms of the subjective or interpretive slants



of the authors, or based on the identity or the personal choices of the authors. The 'less able student' was likely to encounter difficulties in adequately explaining differences between accounts, leading him or her to see different accounts in terms of some kind of *factual error* that the historian committed. These students were expected to view differences in 'defective' terms, ranging from failure on the historian's part to get the 'correct' information, to attributing different accounts to personality flaws on the part of some less-than-honest historians.

Further data collection may provide varied responses upon which more robust categories may be constructed. What was clear, however, was that these teachers believed that what separated the able students from the average or less able students was their ability to explain distinctions that existed between the two accounts based on certain evaluative criteria. As for the average or less able student, he/she might, at best, arrive at a merely superficial understanding of the two accounts but without the ability to explain reasonably why the two accounts may differ.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The aims of conducting the pilot cycles in this study were essentially two-fold; first, the pilot studies were used to determine the feasibility of the data collection methods, and second, the pilot studies were designed to enable the researcher to familiarize himself with the substantive issues inherent in an exploratory research of this nature. In both pilot studies, the inquiry strategy was meant to address both substantive and methodological issues. The analysis of data from the pilot cycles was crucial in re-

shaping the evolving research design, as well as in fine-tuning the research instruments that were used in the main study.

Furthermore, the experience of the pilot studies enhanced the researcher's familiarity with the design aspects of the study, as well as raised his awareness of the logistical and administrative issues that may arise during the main data collection phase. Issues of scale, sampling, logistics, access, transcription of interviews, the format of questionnaire and interview schedules, the suitability of instruments, as well as the 'fitness of purpose' of the methods used were some of the methodological issues and substantive considerations that the pilot cycles threw up. The analysis of the pilot data also enabled the researcher to acquire a preliminary understanding of the main issues inherent in the study. Early findings suggested that teachers' assumptions about students' ideas regarding the nature of historical accounts tended to be varied, though not in an extensive manner. For the most part, the evidence shows that while the teachers had not thought much about the issue, there was strong agreement that students' understandings and preconceptions about historical accounts required further development. The preliminary coding structures and initial interpretation of the pilot data served as essential foundations upon which further analysis of the survey data and data collected in the main study would build.

## Chapter 5: Students' Ideas about the Nature of Historical Accounts

### 5.1 Introduction

As described in previous chapters, this largely qualitative study was designed to explore a range of preconceptions students in Singapore may hold about the nature of accounts. This chapter discusses some of these likely preconceptions through the analysis of data collected from written task-sets and group interviews. More specifically, the chapter attempts to map out students' ideas by examining:

- (i) how students view differences between accounts, and what they make of apparent differences between stories about 'the same bit' of history; and
- (ii) how students decide between rival historical accounts, and the range of ideas they are likely to hold when asked to choose the 'better' account.

The chapter will draw some generalizations about students' ideas and preconceptions about historical accounts to show the range of responses students (in the sample) are likely to make when confronted with disciplinary issues not directly addressed in their daily instruction. The selected examples used as part of building a description of each pattern of idea are drawn from students' responses from both task-set and interview data.

### 5.2 Exploring students' conceptions of accounts: Viewing differences

The research strategy that was used in this investigation, as mentioned in Chapter 3, relied on an indirect approach, one that would allow the researcher to infer tacit ideas

about historical accounts from the way students tackled substantive historical tasks (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Through two written task-sets – that differed in terms of theme, tone and time-scale – students were asked a series of questions that dealt with specific disciplinary issues in history (see discussion on ‘Research Instruments’ in Chapter 3 for details). These questions were designed to elicit responses that may point to some general ideas students have about history, as well as certain key ideas they have about the nature of accounts that are central to the study (see ‘Research Questions’ in Chapter One). Some important questions asked in Task-set 1 (TS1) and Task-set 2 (TS2) included:

- Do you detect any important differences in the two accounts? If **YES**, what are these differences? If **NO**, explain why you think the two stories are telling you the same thing. [TS1/Q1]
- Why is there a difference in terms of how these accounts explained the importance of China’s abandoning of her overseas voyages? [TS1/Q3a]
- Do you detect any differences in what is going on in the two stories? If **NO**, what is the common plot in both stories? If **YES**, what are the important differences in the plots in both stories? [TS2/Q1]
- If you had answered **YES** to the previous question, how would you explain why there are differences in the accounts? If you had answered **NO** to the previous question, explain why the two stories might appear different, but actually are not. [TS2/Q2]

The resultant data was analyzed and interpreted through successive readings based on what is known about students' ideas from pilot work as well as relevant literature, and examined within the context of the research questions.

#### 5.2.1 *Why are there different accounts of 'the same bit' of history?*

Initial inductive coding of data from the written tasks had led to the identification of patterns of ideas and the subsequent construction of preliminary categories based on the appearance of the coded ideas within each response category. From successive readings and re-readings of the data, several of these patterns of ideas and descriptive categories were subsequently combined because of similar characteristics, while others were collapsed under more dominant category descriptors. Responses that did not seem to fall under any of the main categories were grouped as 'Not codeable'. At the end of the coding phase, nine distinct response categories emerged that demonstrated the range of ideas students in the study may hold about differences between accounts (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Range of student responses (by ideas) on why there are different accounts in history

	Why are there different accounts of the 'same bit of history'?
1	Same stuff so not different
2	Some are <i>wrong</i>
3	<i>All</i> could be wrong
4	Knowledge problem
5	Complex past = partial stories
6	Multiple versions (opinion)

7	Implicit recognition of criterion – Point of view
8	Implicit recognition of alternative criterion: Authorship
9	Recognition of explicit construction

These nine response categories may be further classified under four broader categories: *Not different*, *Knowledge deficits*, *Multiple stories* and *Constructional attributes*. Table 5.2 provides an illustration of these ideas under their broader categories, together with a short descriptor depicting each category of response.

Table 5.2: Range of students' ideas on why there are different accounts in history (by broad categories)

Broad Category		Why are there different accounts of the 'same bit of history'?
Not different	1	<b>Same stuff so not different</b> <i>Accounts are not different if they are about the same thing.</i>
	2	<b>Some are wrong</b> <i>Accounts may be different but there is only one 'correct' account of an event, the others must be 'wrong'.</i>
	3	<b>All could be wrong</b> <i>There are different accounts but we may not know which one is 'true' since there's no way to verify.</i>
Knowledge Deficits	4	<b>Knowledge problem</b> <i>There are different accounts because of problems acquiring knowledge about the past.</i>
	5	<b>Complex past = partial stories</b> <i>Different accounts are 'partial stories' that work together to form a 'complete' picture about the past.</i>
	6	<b>Multiple versions (opinion)</b> <i>Accounts are different because authors have different opinions about the past.</i>
Constructional Attributes	7	<b>Implicit recognition of criterion – Point of view</b> <i>Different accounts exist because of legitimate differences in the authors' points of view.</i>
	8	<b>Implicit recognition of alternative criterion: Authorship</b> <i>Accounts are legitimately different because historians interpret things differently.</i>
	9	<b>Recognition of explicit construction</b> <i>Accounts are (re-)constructions by historians bounded by selection, story parameters and other criterial standards. It is in the nature of accounts to be different</i>

Responses that made up the first category warranted its own classification (*Not different*) because it differed from all subsequent categories in the sense that the responses did not consider accounts as different so long as they shared the same facts or were about the same thing. The second to fourth response categories were grouped under *Knowledge deficits*, as students' responses in these categories appeared to attribute differences between accounts to problems in acquiring certain requisite knowledge or factual information about the past. The ideas within these response categories (as well as in the first category) shared a similar predisposition to treat accounts as information resources, where apparent differences (if any) may be resolved through an examination of factual knowledge. Hence, different accounts, for example, were explained in terms of the apparent 'disagreements' over the facts used (or encountered). Generally, students' ideas in the first four response categories pointed towards a 'factual reality', with knowledge about the past being something that is fixed and/or given.

The fifth and sixth response categories were placed under *Multiple stories* where students' ideas seemed to envision, or pointed to, a single knowable past but which was made complex by the existence of multiple versions or partial stories about that past. As events in the past could not be captured in their entirety, different accounts were to be expected. Stitching together these diverse accounts would result in a more complete picture about that past. Nevertheless, even as ideas in these response categories recognized that multiple accounts were natural (or even necessary), differences between accounts remained a factual matter, rooted in the idea that there is an accurate past that may determine the truth or falsity of accounts.

The seventh to ninth ideas response categories were grouped under *Constructional attributes* as they characterized a change in students' ideas about accounts, that is, from one that was 'factual' in orientation (or seen as a 'knowledge' issue) to one that was 'criterial' in nature. Responses indicated a preference to explain different accounts in terms of *specific evaluative criteria*, ranging from the point of view or perspective of the author, to certain norms or standards of professional practice, as well as to attributes such as selection, scope and time-frame that may preside over the 'construction' of a historical account.

The following tables and figures set out the distribution of student responses based on data analysis carried out at a higher level of resolution. Coding of students' responses was done based on the highest clear response category as exemplified by the response categories described in Table 5.2. The use of the term 'highest response' in this instance was tied to notions of the 'more powerful ideas' (Lee & Shemilt, 2007) students were likely to hold about the nature of accounts in history, some of which were also delineated in previous research on accounts (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Hsiao, 2008; Chapman, 2009). As a matter of empirical fact, the conceptualization of 'higher level' ideas in this study was based on analyzing students' responses in view of two considerations, one conceptual, and the other empirical. First, did particular kinds of ideas that students espoused tend to treat history as 'impossible' and bring it to a stop, or were the ideas espoused likely to treat history as 'possible' and allow it to 'go on'? Second, did age-related differences empirically support such a conceptualization – with evidence to show that older students were operating with more powerful ideas than younger ones? The actual conceptualization of the more or less 'powerful' ideas about accounts was constantly



adjusted in light of students' responses to denote a shift (in levels of sophistication) that is in line with normative assumptions about the worth of history education (particularly, in terms of what educators can legitimately assume to be worth teaching).

Nevertheless, in a progressive category scheme where higher levels subsume lower ones, it may be inevitable for each student's response to be coded in more than one category. As such, students' responses were first coded for the highest response category in the first task-set, with a similar coding move made for responses in the second task-set. In the event that a student's highest response category did not appear to match for both task-sets (that is, the student's highest coded response appeared to conflict across the two task-sets), data from the student interviews were then coded to take the highest response common to both task-sets. Figure 5.1 below highlights the global percentage of student responses grouped under the four broad categories, while Table 5.3 set out the distribution of responses across the two age-groups (henceforth, secondary two students are marked as 'year 9', while the JC1 students are marked as 'year 12' respectively).

Figure 5.1: Distribution of student responses explaining different accounts in history (by broad categories)

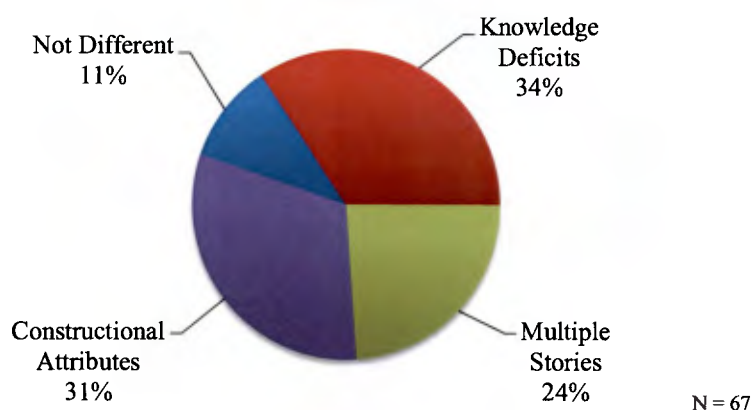


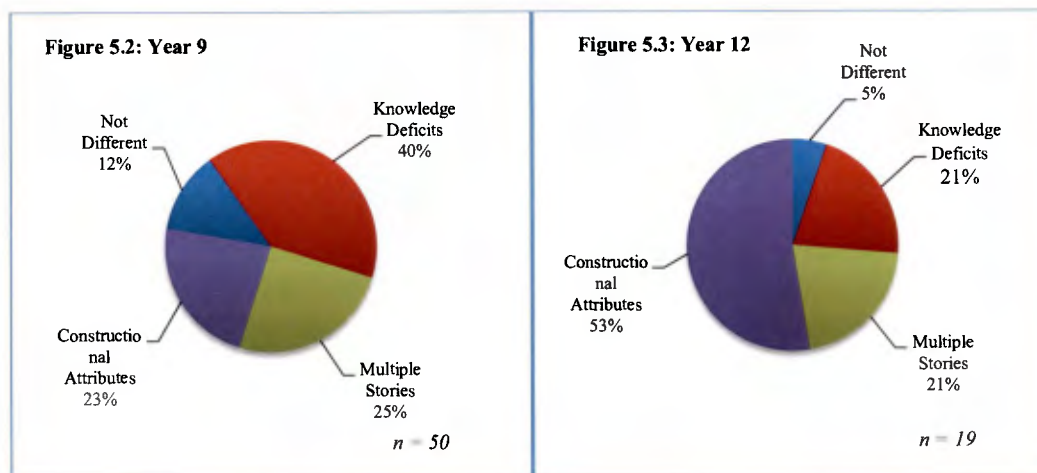
Table 5.3: Distribution of student responses explaining different accounts in history (by number of response and year group)

Group/Category	Year 9	Year 12	Total
<i>Not codeable</i>	2	-	2
1. Same stuff; not different	6	1	7
2. Some are wrong	7	1	8
3. All could be wrong	4	1	5
4. Knowledge problem	8	2	10
5. Complex past/partial stories	5	2	7
6. Multiple versions (opinion)	7	2	9
7. Point of view	6	4	10
8. Implicit recognition of criteria	5	3	8
9. Explicit construction	-	3	3
Total	50	19	69

N = 69      Mean age of year groups: Year 9 (14 years 2 months); Year 12 (17 years 1 month)

As seen in the percentage responses across the broad categories (in Figure 5.1), responses appeared to demonstrate an almost even distribution in the ways students in the study were likely to explain differences between accounts, namely, as due to ‘knowledge deficits’ that were inherent within the accounts (34%), as a consequence of having ‘multiple stories’ about the same historical event (31%), and as a result of particular ‘constructional attributes’ within each account (24%). A detailed breakdown of student responses within each of the distinct categories, however, revealed some differences. For instance, Table 5.3 appeared to suggest that year 9 students (six students) were more likely than year 12 students (one student) to view two accounts as ‘not different’ if they were telling ‘the same story’. Also, none of the year 9 students appeared to attribute apparent differences to explicit construction standards. A breakdown of percentage student responses according to the broad categories, but separated by year groups, indicated more apparent contrasts.

Figures 5.2 & 5.3: Distribution of student responses explaining different accounts in history (percentages of year groups by broad categories)



As shown in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 above, a higher percentage of responses among year 9 students (40%) appeared to attribute differences between accounts to ‘knowledge deficits’, as compared to year 12 students. In fact, a majority of the year 9 students in the study (20 students) seemed to view ‘knowledge problems’ as the main reason why accounts differed. In contrast, only four of the year 12 students (or 21%) believed this was so, with the majority (53% or 10 students) viewing differences in ‘constructional’ terms. Also, a slightly higher proportion of year 9 students (12 students or 25%) than year 12 students (four students or 21%) viewed different accounts as a matter of having multiple versions of the same past; in both year groups, however, responses indicated that ‘multiple stories’ about the past seemed to be the next preferred explanation for accounts being different.

One of the most striking observations that could be made when comparing student responses from both year groups is the possibility of viewing the development of students’ ideas in terms of age-related differences, where older students were likely to operate with higher level ideas about accounts when compared to younger

students. Conversely, younger students also seemed more likely to work with knowledge-based conceptions about accounts, suggesting that they were more predisposed to viewing notions about the past in factual – rather than criterial – terms. The description and explanation of the respective categories of responses in the following sub-section may illustrate further the ‘hierarchical’ nature of students’ ideas and the range of ideas they hold about different accounts in history.

### *5.2.2 Explaining categories of responses*

The subsequent section provides further discussion of each of the nine categories, using selected examples from both task-set and interview data to highlight students’ ideas as coded within each response category. Where interview data was used, this is indicated; otherwise, all examples were written responses. In all cases, *pseudonyms* were given to students when quoting their specific responses.

#### **Not Different**

##### ***Same stuff, so not different***

In this category, responses suggested that some students (almost 11% or seven students) did not recognize relevant differences in the accounts or see any sign of conflict between the two stories. There was a strong preference for treating accounts as ‘not different’ if they were essentially ‘telling the same thing’ (Wai Lin, year 9). Four year 9 students mentioned that both accounts were ‘identical’ because the ‘plot’ in both stories was the same and the ‘ideas’ that each story utilised were the same. Only one year 12 student shared similar responses, and explained that the two accounts were the same because ‘...both stories stuck to the same plot and focus on

the same things' (Nurul, year 12). If there were any seeming differences, these were largely semantics. For example, Harris, year 9, wrote that both accounts were 'talking about the same thing but the words they used are different but practically, they are talking about the same things'. Another argued that the accounts 'appear different because they used different words but both have the same meaning' (Frances, year 9). Others like Marcus, year 9, saw seeming differences in terms of one account having more 'detailed information' than the other. He explained, 'Both accounts have almost the same points in every chapter, and only the way the points are elaborated differed'.

Some students were slightly more discerning, and employed a two-tiered ('base versus superstructure') argument to explain seeming differences. For example, Youyi, year 9, claimed that 'the facts in both stories are the same, but only the opinions differ'. Deena, year 9, however, took this a step further and argued that 'opinions should not be important differences' so long as they 'agreed on the same facts' (Deena, interview). For these two students, both accounts in the task-sets were talking about the same thing as they 'shared the same facts'; what distinguished the two stories were the (non-factual) opinions they contained. This was taken to mean that so long as the 'facts' (base) were 'in agreement', other differences like 'opinions' (superstructure) should not matter; the accounts should essentially be seen as 'the same'. For most of the students in this response category, different opinions should not affect the status of accounts; factual or substantive consistency between stories (such as in terms of the plot, the ideas, the points, and the information used) should override any seeming differences between historical accounts.

## **Knowledge Deficits**

### ***Some are wrong***

Responses in this category (12% or eight students) indicated that students have begun to recognize discernible differences between the two accounts and were treating differences between accounts as an important issue in some way. Many in this category detected certain inconsistencies between the accounts but largely viewed these differences as a factual matter (for example, as a case of the ‘points’ not being ‘in agreement’ according to Janice, year 9). Most responses, however, dealt with the issue of different accounts in a binary fashion or using a ‘correct or wrong’ dichotomy, meaning, the existence of a *single correct narrative* would necessarily negate all other accounts that were different. Many were of the view that different accounts may exist, but there is only ‘one correct account’ of an event; all other accounts of that event must be ‘wrong’. Minghui, year 9, for example, reasoned the matter in this way: ‘an event happened in the past, so there should only be one correct account of that event’. Students who favoured the notion of a ‘one correct account’ explained their position by alluding to a fixed past, or the unchangeable nature of facts we have about that past. As Benjamin, year 9, argued: ‘The content inside a historical account is more or less facts, something that has happened before. And it cannot be changed, basically, so it’s fixed’. Hence, differences or ‘disagreements’ (in cases where students may not be able to detect key differences) between accounts must mean that one or some of them ‘must be wrong’ (Minghui). For some students, these ‘wrong accounts’ also could be explained by reference to certain ‘defects’ inherent within the accounts. They attributed these defects largely to (low-level) notions of *bias* within the accounts, and particularly

due to certain perverse actions on the part of their authors. As a result of historians ‘warping the facts’, the different accounts they write ‘becomes untruthful and distorted’ (Tze Kiat, year 9, interview).

Based on their responses, students in this category seemed willing to entertain the possibility of different or rival accounts of an event that occurred in the past. Nevertheless, for them, there should only be one account of that event that is correct (or in some cases, judged as ‘true’); the others may simply contain ‘lies’, were ‘fakes’ or ‘mistaken’, and ultimately, ‘wrong’. These students appeared to work with the preconception that historical accounts are like *copies* of the past, whereby there is only one true *representation* (or depiction) of that event, albeit reproduced in a textual form. Consequently, for some students, having a single (supposedly ‘correct’) account of an event seemed a reasonable notion. As Hadi explained, ‘Yes, one account would be true and the other account would be a lie [...] we can’t see or differentiate which one is true or not [...] but basically we must have one good, valid account for that certain event’. As seen in Hadi’s case, what makes an account ‘valid’ is the extent to which that an account tells a *true* story about the past (even if it may be difficult to know which one is *true*). Such ideas reinforced the notion of accounts that are viewed as copies of a factual past or reality. Others like Damien (the only year 12 student in this category) argued that it was ‘very important to only have one accurate account of history’, if only to ‘ensure the correspondence of historical accounts to past events’. For many students in this category, having one true or proper account of an event was somehow necessary as something against which other accounts could (or should) be ‘measured’.

### *ALL could be wrong*

Responses in this category (7% or five students) accepted that there are indeed different accounts of the past but while students here have moved away from the notion of a single correct story, they were less sure about the capacity of any historical account to offer 'true' depictions of that past reality. Doubts over issues like 'personal bias', 'author's motives' and the impossibility of knowing which account is the correct story have led them to question the idea of any historical account to be true, with some suggesting that all could be wrong ('Both stories are wrong', Limin, year 9). For students in this category, differences between accounts essentially highlighted the problems in 'trusting' or accepting any account as true. For example, one student insisted that 'Both stories are propaganda. They are written to portray each historian's interests', and consequently, none should be 'trusted' (Jerry, year 9). Other students tended to regard differences between accounts as testimony to the impractical task of knowing the 'real story' as 'we can't read historians' minds' (Rita, year 9). Consequently, this led to the belief that, 'for all we know, none of the accounts can be true' (Amalin, year 9, interview).

Ideas such as these may have emerged due to certain elements that students deemed were impossible to determine, ranging from the differences in the way people think (since 'you can't read people's minds' according to Rita), to the belief that 'we can never confirm the truth about what accounts are saying' as there is no direct access to the past to confirm that 'truth' (Amalin, interview). For these students, unless we are able to go back in time, there is no way to be sure if any of the accounts are true; in fact, they could all be wrong.



### ***Knowledge problem***

Responses of students in this category (15% or ten students) appeared to regard different accounts as the result of ‘gaps’ in historical knowledge. Distinct from students in the second response category (who believed in a more correct account vis-à-vis others that were incorrect) or students in the third response category (who viewed pessimistically the possibility of a ‘true’ or ‘proper’ account), students in this category believed that accounts differed due to problems acquiring knowledge about the past. Some of these problems may include transmission errors when ‘the historical information was not conveyed clearly by people living in the past’ (Xingyi, year 9). Others attributed inconsistencies between accounts to discrepant knowledge historians had at their disposal or their inability to gain ‘the truth’ about the past. Whatever the case, ‘gaps’ in historical knowledge would emerge as a result of these knowledge issues, and historians would then ‘use their opinions to fill up these gaps’ (Fauzana, year 9). As these opinions acted as ‘substitutes’ for the past that they do not know (or have no ability to verify, for some), the account that each historian wrote would naturally differ from another. For some students, such inconsistencies would explain why there were different stories about the same event, and also why there were ‘omissions and missing points to each story’ (Daryl, year 9).

Other students noted that differences also may arise because some historians had used ‘different artefacts or evidence in their research’ (Chee Kong, year 9), while others may have had ‘different access to sources and other materials’ (Kenny, year 12). How a historian used or interpreted his ‘evidence’ and/or the ‘sources’ (both construed in ‘knowledge’ terms) was clearly a point of concern for some students.

One student attributed differences between accounts to a lack of competence on the part of the authors who had failed to ‘interpret the information properly’ (Danny, year 9). However, while these ideas appeared to indicate awareness of authorial decisions in the writing of accounts, most responses were likely to attribute the differences or inconsistencies in accounts to the authors’ inability to get the requisite knowledge, and not so much to their interpretative differences. Essentially, the issue remained a factual matter where points of differences may be resolved if we could get ‘the correct information’ from ‘other sources or other historians’ (Nora, year 12).

### **Multiple Stories**

#### ***Complex past = partial stories***

Student responses in the next two categories appeared to demonstrate a shift beyond simple dichotomous view of accounts (as right/wrong account, for example) by accepting the idea of multiple and different stories about the past. Students in the fifth response category (almost 11% or seven students) recognized that the past is a complex one, and as such, different stories would emerge as a result of ‘people knowing or writing different things’ about that past (Kelly, year 9). For these students, different accounts exist as fragmented or ‘partial stories’ that worked together to form a ‘complete’ picture about the past. As Razak, year 9, reasoned in an interview,

History is not only about one person saying something...maybe one person knows about one thing, then another person knows about this other thing, both of these things happened, but each one only knows part of it, so they only write about what they know.

Students like Razak acknowledged that stories about the past are written by different people who experienced the (same) past in different ways. For Razak, accounts seemed to operate as an extension of a person's lived experiences (albeit presented in textual form), thereby capturing only one aspect – perhaps even a unique aspect – of a particular event. Many, however, would argue that these different stories were necessary to provide readers with better means to understand a complex and multi-faceted event. According to some of them, 'each account carries a different side to a story' (Saiful, year 9) which when put together would 'contribute to a more complete picture' about the past (Hui ren, year 9). As such, different accounts are normal, and they should all be deemed as equally valid as they exist as 'pieces of the puzzle' (Hui ren). This idea of a 'complete past' also was shared by two older students who saw merits in assembling partial stories about an event as doing so would 'provide students with a holistic understanding about the event' (Joyce, year 12).

These responses seemed to suggest that, on its own, each account remained 'incomplete' or inadequate for any balanced understanding about an event as it would only present just 'one side of the story' (Razak). The past is still seen as a factual one, and students in this category continued to regard the issue of different accounts as one of piecing together a 'knowledge-deficient' past. On one hand, such responses may appear to indicate an awareness of the 'incomplete' nature of accounts but these may essentially be low-level conceptions that pointed to the notion of a given past, a copy of which historians could acquire by bringing all disparate accounts together to fit a proper 'pictured past'.

### *Multiple versions (opinions)*

Student responses in this category (13% or nine students) appeared to display a similar awareness of a complex past that necessitated the telling of the story in different ways. However, responses in this category attributed the existence of different accounts to the diverse opinions of the accounts' authors. As Faith, year 12, argued, accounts were bound to be different because 'the author's opinions' would have 'shaped how an account is written'. Other students also were likely to accept differing opinions as a reasonable explanation for having different versions since they recognized that 'people think differently' (Raudha, year 9), and hence, historians too would have different ways of writing their versions of events. 'Opinion' as an explanation for diverse versions or accounts of events, however, may be seen in two ways: first, as a substitute for an author's lack of knowledge about the event (that may result in unverifiable speculation on the part of the author); and second, as stand-in for an author's viewpoint (that may indicate partisanship on one hand, or as a *legitimate* point of view on the other). Given that the past is complex and that historians may not have complete knowledge of the past at their disposal, some students believed that historians would write their versions based on what they *thought* happened or how they *perceived* something to have happened. Only three students (all year 9) seemed to work with this idea of 'opinion' as 'knowledge substitute'.

Responses by the other six students in this category acknowledged the critical and active role historians play in the construction of historical accounts but showed awareness of how the authors' opinions (in the form of personal viewpoints) could affect the stories they write. Some students were aware that as accounts were

essentially products of the historians' personal viewpoints, their versions of events may not solely be commentaries or accounts of the past but more versions of the past that corresponded to their own ideas or views about what happened. While some may insist that 'the duty of the historian is to recount history as it is, unbiased and untainted' and without any deliberate attempt to deceive (Noel, year 9), others like Garry and Darren (both year 9), attributed difference between accounts to attempts by less-than-honest historians to intentionally 'distort and rid people of the truth of the real, actual events' (Garry). These students worked with the premise that historians are inherently biased; some had ulterior motives while others may have reasons to lie. As such, partisanship concerns would weigh heavily on their versions of events. In also highlighting the professional work of historians (like Noel), Claudia, year 12, recognized that while historians have 'their own personal opinions about certain issues' they may not have written their accounts with the deliberate intention to mislead or misinform. For Claudia and Noel, the versions historians write may be the result of them making legitimate suppositions based not only on their personal viewpoints but possibly also after considering 'the evidence' (Noel). Responses in this category, suggested that students were likely to view different accounts as the result of historians producing their own versions that were largely influenced by their 'opinions' about events in the past. Despite notions of multiple versions, however, the assumption remained that of a *single* past that is accessed by *single* versions of events as written by each (respective) author/historian.

## Constructional Attributes

### *Implicit recognition of criterion – Point of view*

The final three response categories highlighted further changes in students' ideas about different accounts – from an approach that questioned the factual basis of accounts to one that possibly began to attribute differences to implicit norms or criteria. Students in this largest response category (15% or ten students) shared similar attributes with some students in the previous category in maintaining that multiple accounts of the past are not unexpected as they exist to reflect the differing viewpoints of their authors. Nevertheless, responses in this category demonstrated a less ambiguous notion of the author's viewpoint, and one that was not expressed simply in 'opinion' terms. Though indications of such standards were faint, the move to consider differences between accounts in terms of differing points of view may be seen as a relevant attempt by students to make sense of competing accounts in *criterial* terms. As Shu Kiat, year 9, explained in an interview,

Well, you can say it's the same plot, the same main event, but it's different in the sense that you can see it from many points of view - from the points of view of the aborigines, from the points of view of the migrants from China, from India, from Malaya... Yeah, there are different stories because they came from different places, have different points of view, went through different experiences, and so on. So, there would be different stories but they represent various points of view, and all can be accepted.

Shu Kiat's argument was premised on the idea that having a point of view was inevitable given different lived experiences and notions of diversity in terms of how the world was seen from the eyes of different groups of people. Such a view may

justify different accounts or be used as the basis for legitimizing or accepting all accounts of events. Indeed, most students in this response category were predisposed to recognize all points of view as valid. For them, different accounts were reflective of their diverse viewpoints, and the decision to accept all accounts as valid may ultimately rest on humanistic grounds: that ‘we all have different experiences, different feelings about the same thing... so we will definitely have different views, different perspectives on things’ (Zain, year 9).

Given their disposition to accept all points of view as legitimate in their own right, several older students also appeared to suggest a notion of a point of view that went beyond the author’s personal prerogative. For these students, different accounts were not simply a reflection of the respective authors’ points of view, but also were manifestations of specific ‘viewpoints that the writers wished to establish’ (Xueling, year 12). For them, different accounts of an event in history were written to convince the reader into accepting a particular point of view (over an issue) that the author espoused (that may, at times, be self-serving). On balance, however, student responses in this category appeared to hint at the possibility of explaining different accounts in terms other than ones that subject such differences to notions of factuality. Responses seemed to hint at an implicit recognition of a criterion in the construction of an account – where the author’s point of view on an issue may be seen as justifiable and possibly even necessary.

### ***Implicit recognition of alternative criteria***

Responses in this category (12% or eight students) went a step further than those in the previous category by offering more explicit (albeit tentative) criterial standards

that may be used to differentiate accounts. Students in this category acknowledged that accounts are necessarily different, but explaining differences must go beyond simply accepting the notion that all points of view are valid. A main idea that emerged to explain possible differences was in the way the event was ‘interpreted’ by the authors (through their accounts), and more specifically, to take into consideration the credentials or competencies of the authors when making distinctions between accounts.

For students who seemed aware of the historian’s active role in constructing accounts, factors such as the varied backgrounds of individual historians, their proficiency in the field, their access to sources of evidence, as well the potency of their explanatory power were important elements to consider when distinguishing one account from the other. Shan Kit, year 9, for example, explained that accounts were different due to a range of factors, but all necessarily related to issues of authorship:

There are differences due to the objectives of the historian. They have personal biases as well. Some interpret the dismantling of the navy as bad. One might see it as good. And this personal bias might influence the writing of their accounts, and thus their conclusions. ... Also, the social background of the two historians could have brought the two different conclusions. One could have been brought up in a society which felt that Zheng He’s voyages were a source of great pride for China, another may face conditions that were the direct opposite. One other possibility is that one of the historians is not as good a historian as the other and thus the product was different, having a completely different conclusion.



The implied notion in Shan Kit's response was that in explaining different accounts, several aspects would have to be taken into consideration, such as: a) the different research objectives of the authors, which would *predictably* lead the two historians to reach two different conclusions; b) the different beliefs of the historians, their personal stances and social backgrounds, as well as the cultural or social norms that predominate in the societies of both historians; and c) the professional training and the level of experience of the historians themselves, suggesting a link between their training with the quality of the accounts they write. In addition, underlying these authorship issues also were suggested notions of location, context, proximity and cultural familiarity. As Jason (Year 12) explained in an interview,

I think you have to look at where the historian is situated when he writes his account. There are different historians who might live in different eras or time periods. One might live close to the event, while the other one might live long after the event. One historian might be born in the same country and knows the culture and all, while the other may be an outsider who may not know the culture very well... So, these things will certainly lead to some differences'.

Students who shared Shan Kit's and Jason's position often pointed out that the issue went beyond the idea that different accounts presented different points of view; they explained the need to not only consider the factors or experiences that may influence the development of historians' accounts but also how these may (directly) influence their interpretations of events. Accordingly, these students believed that such author-centred issues would, in one way or another, affect the way historians 'explained the importance of events in their accounts' (Rosmah, Year 12), the 'different standpoints' they might take (Xuexin, Year 9), as well as the 'arguments' they would use in building their accounts (Debbie, Year 9). Notably, the students in this category

appeared to demonstrate a more cautious or tentative approach when relating each historian's account to a *valid* point of view or a *legitimate* perspective. Even if the responses hinted at the need to deal with these aspects, references to specific criteria or standards of working practice that may account for such differences remained largely implicit.

### ***Explicit construction***

The only responses featured in this category came from three year 12 students (4%) and for the most part, they appeared more as *indications* of student ideas' rather than explicit responses that clearly described the features of this category. The students' responses hinted at their awareness of certain kinds of criteria in-built within accounts that may possibly explain differences in how they were created. While authorship issues remained important reference points, students' responses also indicated a readiness to move beyond these and to begin thinking about accounts not simply as textual reproductions of a past reality, but more as written *constructions* distinguished by attributes such as focus, selection, theme and time-scale.

Yingjie, for example, stressed the different time-scales and the scope of analysis in the two accounts presented, and saw that these differences had necessarily shifted the way each account viewed the 'significance of the event'. She argued that as both accounts had 'focused on different time periods, this resulted in the importance of the event being measured differently'. Consequently, she added, this 'resulted in differences in terms of how each account presented the event'. Another student, Yuvan, explained the difference in focus to thematic distinctions,

They were focusing on different aspects or themes – Story 1 wanted to focus more on the immediate concerns of internal politics and affairs. It wanted to say how by doing so, the decision helped to promote stability and self-sufficiency. However, Story 2 would rather focus on China's external affairs – how abandoning her overseas voyage had affected China's naval and military development, and in the long-run, proved to be an important reason why the western fleets were able to open China up to the world.

Students like Yingjie and Yuvan recognized that understanding differences between accounts required taking into consideration important aspects such as theme, story focus and time-scale. While they acknowledged the critical role of historians in constructing accounts, they also recognized that these accounts were constructed within certain boundaries set by the authors themselves. Yingjie described these boundaries as 'selective decisions' that were partly 'based on the different areas the two historians wanted to investigate concerning the importance of China abandoning her overseas voyages'. As historians were apt to set boundaries and to make selections based on the questions they wished to investigate, the issues of significance in one account would necessarily differ – in line with the focus, questions or concerns of the author.

Another idea that suggested students' viewing accounts based on the nature of its construction was the notion of 'perspectives' in history. The use of this term, however, appeared to be used in previous categories of responses to refer to elements of a subjective view on things. For the most part, students in previous categories were likely to refer to 'opinions', 'points of view' or even 'personal bias' when using the term 'perspective'. Few referred to perspectives in terms of the influences or experiences that necessarily shaped the author's assumptions about the world or how

each historian's perspective could be examined against the norms and standards of historical practice. Jeremy, however, may come closest to that. 'Writing about the past', according to him, 'does not only require interpretation based on evidence, but also the inclusion of legitimate standpoints'. As he argued,

History is essentially a study on perspectives on an event. As much as it aims to be impartial, the accounts by different people will remain inherently different. This is because the assumption of the idea, *ceteris paribus*, often does not hold. Historians may come from different backgrounds, and may be granted access to different evidence and sources. Their sense of 'assistance' will thus differ. Factors like age, culture, sensibilities of age (time periods) etc., may all become factors. The list is not exhaustive and the influence of viewpoints may further be explained through anthropology or sociology. Essentially, what a historian may or may not write in his stories is his perspective on that issue.

Jeremy's response seemed to indicate that historians' perspectives remained at the heart of their stories, and this may explain why accounts are 'inherently' different. For Jeremy, a historian's perspective on specific issues is not only inescapable, but necessary. Yet, while the accounts historians write are inextricably linked to their perspectives, 'the interpretations that they construct are based on the strength of their evidential claims'. Bearing in mind the standards of professional practice, 'two stories' about an event 'may provide different (though not necessarily opposing) views on that same bit of history' – both should be judged based on their 'argument' and 'historical claims'.

For the three students in this category, all accounts must be considered on the basis of what the authors seek to know, the focus of their investigation, as well as the

perspectives that have informed their construction. Also, by understanding that accounts are essentially (re-)constructions of past events that are bounded by criteria such as author selection, story parameters and standards of practice, students in this category have demonstrated more sophisticated means of coming to grips with the complex nature of alternative accounts.

### **5.3 Exploring students' conceptions of accounts: Deciding between accounts**

The analysis undertaken in the previous section provided indications as to the range of ideas students are likely to hold when addressing differences between accounts writing about 'the same bit' of history. Viewed in terms of a limited cross-sectional study of students from two year-groups (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4), responses indicated some evidence of *possible* shifts in students' ideas – from viewing the issue of *differences* as a factual matter, to perceiving the same issue as one that may require a reference to certain criteria or standards of practice. A similar pattern emerged when analysing student responses when they were asked to decide between rival historical accounts. As will be seen in the next section, an analysis of the broad categories also pointed to possible shifts in the kinds of ideas students held about the nature of historical knowledge and what it meant for one account to be 'better' than another. Some important questions asked in both task-sets from which data was collected included:

#### **Task-set 1**

- Is there any means by which we can decide which account is better?  
(TS1/Q3b)
- Is one account better than the other? (TS1/Q3c)

## Task-set 2

- How could we decide whether one account is better than the other?

(TS2/Q4a)

- Is one of the accounts above better than the other? Explain your answer.

(TS2/Q4b)

### 5.3.1 Deciding between accounts: broad patterns of response

A similar coding strategy undertaken when analyzing students' responses about 'different accounts' (see pp.143-144) was used to code students' responses to specific questions asking students about the possible ways to decide 'the better account'. Inductive coding of data led to the identification of patterns of ideas and categories of responses. From successive readings of the data, several patterns of ideas and categories exhibiting similar characteristics were subsequently combined. At the end of the coding phase, eight response categories emerged that demonstrated the range of ideas students in the study may hold about differences between accounts (see Table 5.4).

Table 5.4: Range of student responses (by ideas) across both task-sets on how we can decide which account is better

Category	How can we decide which is the better account?
1	We look for the best copy
2	We choose 'the preferred' version
3	We try and find more stuff
4	We count opinions or average views
5	We combine stories together
6	We consider all points of view (relativism)

7	We examine the historian's background
8	We consider construction standards as criteria

These eight response categories may be further classified under three broader categories: *Best version*, *Merge and tally* and *Review criteria*. Table 5.5 presents these ideas under their broader categories, together with a short descriptor depicting each category of response.

Table 5.5: Range of students' ideas on how we can decide which account is better (by broad categories)

Broad Category		How can we decide which is the better account?
Best version	1	<b>Look for the best copy</b> <i>We look for the version that is more 'correct' or 'true' and corresponds to the factual past.</i>
	2	<b>Can't decide in principle</b> <i>There's no way to decide as we do not have direct access to the past and it is impossible to read people's minds.</i>
	3	<b>Try and find more stuff</b> <i>We try and plug up the 'gaps' in historical knowledge by looking at alternative sources of information.</i>
Merge and Tally	4	<b>Combine stories together</b> <i>We incorporate all accounts to get to a 'truer' or more complete picture of the past.</i>
	5	<b>Count opinions or average views</b> <i>We take a consensus among authors by counting their opinions and choose the majority view.</i>
Review Criteria	6	<b>Accept all points of view (relativism)</b> <i>Not desirable to decide – we should accept all accounts as points of view that are equally relevant and equally valid.</i>
	7	<b>Examine the historian's background</b> <i>We examine the historian's background, socio-cultural contexts, beliefs and professional competence.</i>
	8	<b>Consider construction standards as criteria</b> <i>Explicitly recognise construction standards as crucial in deciding, such as the standards of argument, parameters of story, plausibility of explanations &amp; interpretation of evidence.</i>

Broadly-speaking, these categories appeared to reflect similar patterns of thinking when compared to the moves students made when explaining differences (see Table

5.2 on p.141): the first three response categories were grouped under *Best version* as they characterized a response that seemed to operate from an information-based position. As such, responses in these categories were predisposed to choosing the version based on the accuracy of the facts used or the factual knowledge that had been written about the event. The basic response for students in these categories ranged from looking for the best copy 'out there' to searching for the relevant knowledge that can plug the apparent deficiencies within accounts. A key difference within this broad category, however, was in the way the 'solution' (of securing the best version) was viewed – from a standpoint that suggested the relative ease with which this could be done, to one that pointed to serious problems in finding that best version, and to one that recognized the difficulties but yet saw the hypothetical possibility of having one.

Responses in the fourth and fifth categories were grouped under *Merge and tally* as they offered an intermediate position by either postulating an 'integrated version' on the grounds of seeking a complete picture about the past, or of finding some form of consensus among the authors by tallying or averaging accounts to get the majority view. Responses in the sixth to eighth categories were grouped under *Review criteria* as they appeared to suggest a more reflective approach when evaluating accounts. This was done by placing an emphasis on a *criterial* review of accounts based on their authorial and constructional attributes. These criteria ranged from considering the points of view and backgrounds of the authors, to evaluating each account based on its construction standards.



Coding of students' responses to the idea of deciding the better account was similarly done based on the highest clear response category (see discussion on pp.147-163). Using data principally from the written task sets, and supplemented by the group interviews, each student's response was coded for the highest response category (from the numbered set). Again, student responses frequently indicated the use of multiple kinds of ideas when talking about history but it was possible to code their ideas about *accounts* using the response categories constructed in Table 5.5. Figure 5.4 below highlights the global percentage of student responses grouped under the three broad categories, while Table 5.6 set out the distribution of responses within each distinct category and across the two age-groups.

Figure 5.4: Distribution of student responses in deciding the better account (by broad categories)

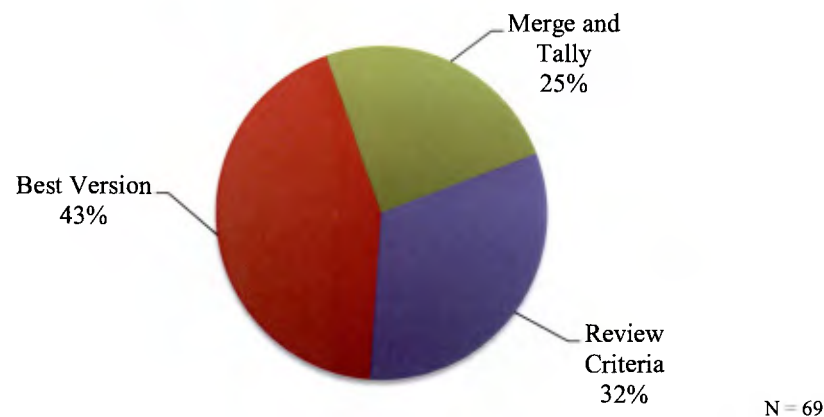


Table 5.6: Distribution of student responses in deciding the better account (by number of response and year group)

Group/Category	Year 9	Year 12	Total
1. Best copy	13	1	14
2. Preferred version	6	1	7
3. Find more stuff	8	1	9
4. Combine stories	7	3	10
5. Count opinions	5	2	7
6. Accept all views	5	3	8
7. Examine historian	5	4	9
8. Consider standards	1	4	5
Total	50	19	69

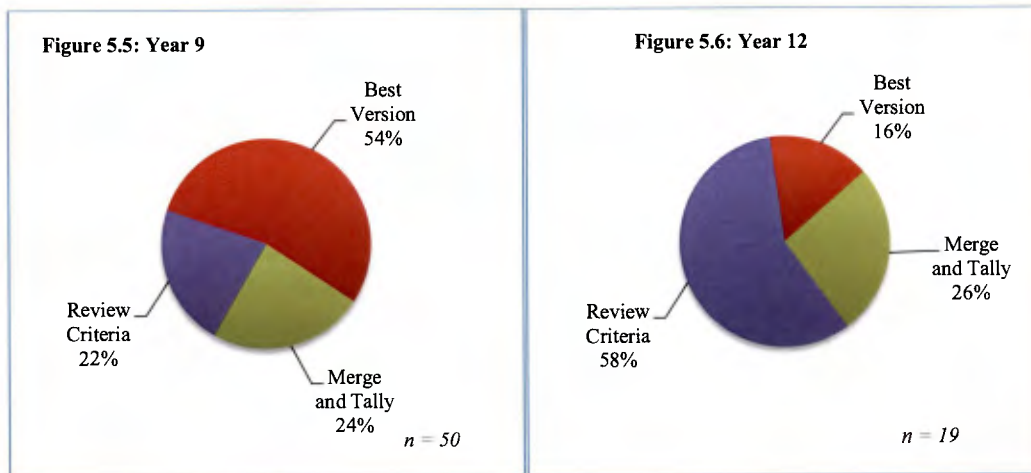
N = 69

Mean age of year groups: Year 9 (14 years 2 months); Year 12 (17 years 1 month)

Percentage responses across the broad categories (as seen in Figure 5.4) showed that nearly half of the students in the study (43%) were predisposed to choose the better account based on its factual basis or how the account corresponded to the factual past. A smaller percentage response (25%) indicated a preference for an approach that signalled a consensus of multiple accounts, either by combining them or by seeking a majority position. The remaining student responses, which comprised nearly a third (32%) of total percentage response, appeared to favour an adjudication strategy that was based on the use of a certain criterion or a set of criteria. Looking at the distinct categories (in Table 5.6), the highest proportion of student responses in 'less sophisticated'(i.e. fact-based) categories such as 'best copy' were year 9 students (93% or 13 out of 14 students in the category). In addition, when viewed across the eight response categories, the moves students made appeared to suggest a corresponding increase or decrease in numbers between the two year groups as the proposed strategies moved from 'less sophisticated' strategies to 'more sophisticated' (i.e. criteria-based) ones. For example, year 12 students appeared in greater numbers as the range of responses moved towards the 'more sophisticated' strategies. In contrast, the number of year 9 students decreased as the proposed strategies moved into more complex types.

A breakdown of percentage responses by broad categories and separated by age-groups highlighted other apparent differences in student responses across the two year groups. As Figures 5.5 and 5.6 below indicated, similar patterns of response across age groups appeared to exist with those that were presented in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 (on explaining accounts, p.146).

Figures 5.5 & 5.6: Distribution of student responses in deciding the better account (percentages of year groups by broad categories)



The majority response among year 9 students (54% or 27 students), for example, favoured a factual-based ‘best version’ approach to judge the better account, with most students in this broader category predisposed to choosing the account that was the ‘best copy’ of the event. Only four year 12 students (or 21%) favoured this approach. The majority response among year 12 students (58% or 11 students) proposed (instead) an evaluation of each account based on criteria such as examining authorship issues or reviewing construction standards. The choice to ‘merge and tally’ accounts had comparable percentage responses among both year 12 students’ responses (21%) and year 9 students (24%). For the latter group, ‘review criteria’ was the least preferred move whereas looking for the ‘best version’ was the least favoured move among year 12 students.

Comparing responses from both year groups (on ways to decide the better account) highlighted the possibility, once again, of viewing the development of students’ ideas in terms of age-related differences. As suggested by Figures 5.5 and 5.6, older

students were likely to use ‘more sophisticated’ strategies to decide on the better account compared to younger students. A majority of the year 12 students, for example, had proposed strategies that went beyond simple moves such as ‘checking the facts’ (moves favoured by the majority of year 9 students) to include ways and means to evaluate accounts based on *criteria*. In addition, the range of strategies that students offered when seeking the better account also may tentatively suggest the possibility of viewing students’ thinking and mental moves when adjudicating between accounts across a progression of ‘less sophisticated’ to ‘most sophisticated’ moves (as mentioned earlier). In this instance, the ‘more able’ students (in both year groups) were more likely to hold ‘more powerful’ ideas and understandings about the nature of historical accounts that enabled them to propose sophisticated means to adjudicate and arbitrate between two competing accounts of the past. These responses across age-groups suggest the possibility of a teaching strategy that can legitimately teach students second-order or disciplinary understandings (in a progressive manner and built along the notion of developing students’ understandings). The explanation of the respective categories of responses in the following sub-section describes the moves students were likely to make when evaluating accounts, and by extension, reveals the range of ideas and understandings they hold about accounts and the nature of historical knowledge.

### *5.3.2 Explaining the response categories*

#### **Best Version**

***We look for the best copy based on the accuracy of the facts (Best copy)***

In this largest response category (20% or 14 students), accounts were regarded by students as telling *truthful* stories about *real* events that happened in the past. Consequently, the means to decide the better account was by selecting the account that provided ‘true descriptions’ based on the consistency of the ‘factual knowledge’ they displayed (Frances, year 9). Deciding the ‘best copy’ then would involve choosing the account for the ‘true facts’ it contained, the ‘accuracy’ of its description, and whether the account corresponded to the ‘truth’ of the (factual) past.

A recurrent idea that emerged in student responses, for example, was for the better account to be *consistent* in terms of its use of factual information – such as the proper dates, the correct historical names and personalities, and the exact periods and location of that event. Checking that ‘the facts are there’ (Limin, year 9) or that accounts must contain ‘absolute facts only’ (Marcus, year 9) appeared to be the most likely starting points for many students looking for the best copy. In addition, the better account also must contain information that corresponded with the *factual* reality, or as Janice, year 9, described it, ‘the events that actually happened in the past’. Hence, accounts that do not contain the requisite ‘facts’ and do not correspond to ‘actual events’ that happened in the past must necessarily be ‘worse accounts’ (Hidayat, year 9).

Students like Hidayat preferred highlighting attributes of the ‘worse account’ as a means to explain why an account that contained ‘only absolute facts’ was ‘better’. While this idea appeared to suggest the beginnings of a disconfirmation strategy (or at least elements of it), such a response remained focused on the idea of selecting the

best copy against which other accounts could be proven to be deficient or flawed. The 'worse account' also was identified by other students as one that not only contained the 'wrong facts' but also 'tries to hide the truth by giving unreal events' (Rafi, year 9). Accounts of events that were written to deliberately mislead or invented to intentionally distort, were seen to have undermined the truthfulness of events that happened, thereby making them 'worse accounts'. Selecting the better account involved sifting 'the real facts' from the distorted ones, and to be wary of accounts that, for example, put an extremely positive light on a 'country's or a person's name' (Rafi). Nevertheless, these students failed to provide any indication as to how this may be done. Somehow, the better account could be chosen simply based on possible (factual) errors, flaws or deficiencies among competing accounts. The logic of that position dictates that students check for the worst 'distorter' amongst the accounts' authors as the next (imminent) move, if they could not detect any flaw or deficiency within the accounts.

Five students, however, appeared to suggest some possible ways to select the best copy. One way, for example, was to determine its *accuracy*. This could be done by considering the *time-lapse* between the event and the time the account was written. Accounts were deemed to be accurate, if 'the account was closest to the event' (Shen Xi, year 9), and if 'the account was written immediately or right after the event' and 'not long after the event' (Andy, year 9). For these students, the *accuracy* of an account was defined by simple notions of 'historical distance' so much so that 'the longer the time gap, the less accurate the account' was likely to be (Vicky, year 9). This would presumably mean that any modern account about a particular event in the distant past would have serious *accuracy* issues.

Another suggested way to get the best copy was to consider the account's correspondence to present reality. Specifically, this involved 'matching the accounts with what we know about China today' (Ee-Ming, year 9). Ee-Ming's position seemed to imply that an account can be judged as 'more correct' based on how things looked in the present. As she argued:

I believe that Story 2 is better. Looking at China today, we find that their economy has just started expanding. In fact, China started industrializing only about 20 years ago. This shows that for many years China was isolated by other countries and was greatly affected when the Western forces came to open China up (hence, showing that Source 1 is not reliable).

Notwithstanding her lack of knowledge about Chinese history, Ee-Ming had approached the issue in a fairly logical manner, that is, by looking at certain *verifiable* indications that supported the claims made in each account. This appeared as a rather sophisticated move but may be limited by the idea that the trustworthiness of an account (in its capacity as the better version) can only be authenticated by the knowledge that we have about China today. The notion of using current reality as proof of an account's credibility was also shared by Geraldine, the only year 12 student in this category. She explained that 'if we can base the accounts on the real history of China today, we would be able to sieve out biased information and then judge which is the correct account'. For Ee-Ming and Geraldine, selecting the 'correct' account required some kind of 'test' to see how far the 'facts' presented corresponded to present reality. Consequently, this may mean that unless the present reality can serve as evidence or as reference points for events that happened in the past, we may never be able to determine the claims made in historical accounts.

***We can't decide in principle, except to choose 'the preferred' version (Preferred version)***

The responses in this category (10% or seven students) suggested that while students may give *in principle* agreement to the possibility of choosing a better account, they felt that it may not be possible to do so simply because we lacked the means to verify the 'truthfulness' of accounts. Although they believed that there was undoubtedly a 'real story' about the past 'out there', these students remained unconvinced on the capacity of historical accounts to provide true stories about that past. Some worked with the assumption that all accounts suffered from the inclusion of their authors' opinions as *substitutes* for knowledge that they (perhaps) could never have. Consequently, the idea that accounts could serve as *accurate* stories of a finished past was generally regarded with deep scepticism.

Students in this response category believed that there was indeed a *real* past, and historical events *did* happen. However, the absence of eyewitnesses who had directly observed or experienced the events created difficulties in verifying the truth of what is said in written accounts. As Zakiah, year 9, argued, 'if there are no eyewitnesses to these events, people won't know whether the historians are writing the truth or the wrong things'. Hence, in the absence of these key witnesses, or the fact that 'none of us were there to see it happen' (Ikmal, year 9), all accounts of historical events must remain severely speculative at best. Farhanis (year 9) expressed this position well in an interview:

Well, it's kind of true that history is what really happened, but there's no way of us knowing that it happened the way it did unless the real



person who is there, who went through that part of history is still alive... who can tell us what happened... So, you can't have any proper story because you can't know the truth about what each story says.

Farhanis' response suggested several key ideas about accounts shared by students in this category: first, that there is a real or factual past that counted as 'history that happened'; and second, that there is no way for us to verify the truth of what happened unless a direct participant or observer is alive to tell us otherwise. Consequently, as historians usually write their accounts from a knowledge-deficient position and 'can never be 100% right' (Rebecca, year 9), we can never get a 'proper story' (judged in 'truth' terms) about the past.

While these students took a sceptical attitude on the issue and were doubtful of their own ability to decide between accounts, some appeared to demonstrate a readiness to consider the possibility of a *preferred* version instead, justified in terms of 'reader appeal' or how well the account suited the readers' own understandings. The suggestions to 'reader appeal', however, were often arbitrary or left to personal predilections, and as such, were never articulated clearly. As Damien, year 12, explained:

We (the reader) basically have to depend on our instincts to judge. I came to the decision that Story 1 is better based on what I think about the account. Though I don't know which account is better, my personal opinion is that Story 1 is better.

For Lynn and Amalin, ill-defined subjective reader preferences also appeared to ultimately dictate their selection of the better account, such as 'how familiar' the story was to them (Lynn, year 9) or how well the account matched what they

‘already know about the event itself’ (Amalin, year 9). Under these circumstances, a more rational use of evaluative criteria may not be necessary in justifying a choice between accounts; it may all depend on how readers *felt* about the preferred account. While such responses may appear to indicate the use of readers’ *contextual* knowledge as a means to decide between accounts, they were usually of the less sophisticated variety, that is, selecting the better account may depend on how well each account fit the readers’ personal expectations or preferences.

*We try and find more stuff (Find more stuff)*

A common position shared by students in this category (14% or ten students) with those in previous categories is the notion of a real story that exists ‘out there’. However, for these students, deciding between accounts may not be a simple matter of identifying the true story from among all other false versions, or choosing the ‘preferred’ version from among other accounts whose truth-claims may never be verified. Instead, students in this category believed that while a decision on the better account can be made, it may not be possible to do so without making references to further sources of information.

Many of the students in this category believed that a decision about the better account would not be possible simply by looking at the two accounts presented. Furthermore, the existing knowledge they had at their disposal also was inadequate to enable them to make any decisions concerning the better account. According to these students, the ‘gaps’ in terms of what we know about the past were the result of several factors, one of which was possible transmission errors that would lead to inaccuracies in the way the accounts were presented. As Omar, year 9, explained,

‘after passing down so many times, there will surely be changes to the story and people may even pass wrong information about the events that had happened’. The much-favoured move, then, was to address these deficiencies through an approach that appealed to alternative sources of information or other authoritative versions.

One way the choice of the better account could be made was through ‘research’. Many students in this category were quick to suggest a trip to the library to get ‘more information through reference books’ (Siew Chin, year 9) or to ‘see what other historians have written’ (Nora, year 12) or even to ‘check the internet to know which one is correct’ (Edmund, year 9). Such moves were deemed necessary as a means to plug the knowledge problem and to see which account contained ‘more mistakes’. A few students pointed to the history textbook as the resource to turn to when in doubt about what different accounts say. Hadi (year 9), for example, saw the textbook as a most trustworthy resource anytime there was a need to ‘check the real story’:

I only believe a story in a textbook because in a history story some historians may have different understandings of that real story. People can lie so others won’t know the real story. But if they want to check if it is the real story, they should look for textbooks to show them that it’s the real story.

For Hadi, unlike the history textbook, history stories (as alternative accounts) may not offer the ‘real story’ due to the interpretative influence – most times negative or undesirable – of their authors. Textbooks, however, was not seen by him as ‘any other history story’; as the purveyor of the ‘real story’, the history textbook was regarded as *the* reference point from which to assess the consistency (or most likely, deficiencies) of all other accounts to the established story.

Other students proposed that we examine the ‘sources that the historians used’ to write their accounts, claiming that some of these ‘sources can be biased or corrupt’ (Faris, year 9). An option Faris suggested was to ‘go through all the sources or evidence that the historians used’ in the writing of their accounts and search for any inconsistencies or errors that may distinguish one account from another. The objective was two-fold; first, to enable us to check if the authors had ‘interpreted the evidence wrongly’ (Eric, year 9), and second, to allow us to ‘check the evidence for ourselves to see which account has more inaccuracies’ (Haryadi, year 9). Either way, by looking at the materials the historians have used in the writing of their accounts, students assumed that it may then be possible to choose the better account. The notions of evidence and interpretation, however, may not have been properly understood by some of these students. Raihan, year 9, saw ‘evidence’ in terms of ‘visible proof’ that can help you select the better account. As she explained in an interview:

You need visible proof, like something to show that it really happened. Like if you make up a story, and then you have no proof, then people might not believe you. But if you had the ‘thing’ to show that something actually happened, or what you said did take place, then people would believe you!

Raihan’s position may on one level indicate an awareness of the role of evidence in an account. Nevertheless, the idea that emerged from her other responses seemed to indicate a reference to ‘proof’ more as ‘tests’ to determine that what was said in the account can be authenticated by the events unfolding in history. Such allusions to ‘visible proof’ as yardsticks to decide on the more correct account, however, were

often used (in students' responses) as *confirmation* rather than as *evidence* of the events mentioned in the stories.

For students in this category, their suggestions on ways to choose the better account were often framed in a conditional manner. The tendency was to treat accounts as deficient or tentative, pending further 'checks' or confirmation with other external sources – some deemed as 'authoritative' while others may be regarded as mitigating options necessary to identify the less-than-perfect account. Nevertheless, the suggestions proposed in choosing the better account (amongst the possibly deficient or imperfect accounts) were largely based on the assumption that the necessary knowledge to be found is easily accessible or readily available, or at least, that such decisions could be made once the knowledge was found.

### **Merge and Tally**

#### ***We combine stories together (Combine stories)***

In this category, student responses (13% or nine students) seemed to indicate a disinclination to decide between accounts. For these students, accounts existed to complement each other, thereby enabling readers to have a broader understanding of historical events. Each account, on its own, is adjudged to be 'incomplete' – in the sense that it presents just 'one side of the story' (Jane, year 9) – and thus only could offer partial stories about past events. Rather than decide which account is better, a more favourable proposition (as suggested by the three students in the interview excerpt below) would be to 'combine them together':

**Interviewer: Do you think that this issue about having two accounts of the same event is important, slightly important, or not important at all? Tell me why you think so.**

*Lena:* Important! Because the two accounts might tell the facts in different ways, so, even if it's about the same event, they might say things differently! But I think it's important to have both so that you can, like, maybe combine them or something so that you can get a complete picture.

*Farahin:* I think it's also important because sometimes two accounts can have different points, so you can just like pick out points, and compare. Or it's like one account has missing points but the other account has them, so you'll get more points when you combine the two sources, and so you'll get to know more stuff...

*Huiren:* Also, you can compare what the two different historians are saying. This is important because they might be focusing on different aspects, and some of them might be biased and wrote only one side of the story...So, yes, maybe we should combine them together. This way, we can get a better idea about what happened...

From this excerpt, three main ideas about students' understandings may be inferred: first, there is a complete picture of the past that may be acquired by combining partial (and oftentimes conceived as imperfect) stories about an event. The idea of 'the best copy' re-emerged in this category but this time in the form of an integrated or consolidated 'super-account'. Second, implicit in the responses was the realization that current knowledge about the past remained deficient or incomplete. Nevertheless, a more complete or finished story (or what they perceived as the best story) could be found by accepting all accounts and weaving a tapestry of single narratives into an integrated whole. Clearly, students' ideas remained fixed on the idea of a 'real past' that had existed, one that could be retold through an

amalgamated 'super-account' which corresponded with that past. And third, students seemed to indicate an awareness of the *multiple* origins of accounts – that they were produced by human minds and bounded by individual dispositions, experiences and viewpoints. Rather than addressing or questioning these differences, students were more inclined to favour an integrative solution – by accepting the diverse accounts the authors write as essential parts of a bigger whole.

For some older students, combining accounts together also was seen as a most logical course of action. Sofia, year 12, for example, argued that every account is necessary in building a 'holistic understanding' about an event as each one would contribute to an emerging 'true picture' of that past. Rather than having to choose one account over another, Sofia preferred instead to accept both (or all) accounts as crucial in enabling readers to understand events better. She explained the differences in the accounts about the Ming expeditions in terms of one account complementing the other to present a more complete picture: 'one provides information about the internal benefits while the other completes the topic by looking at the external implications of the decision'. For students like Sofia, all accounts are necessary components to the complete story, and as such, no account should be regarded as better (in terms of quality) than the other; the solution should instead be an integrative one – one that 'brings out a cohesive picture about the past' (Joyce, year 12), by adding or incorporating all 'sides of the story' (Faith, year 12).

Even as they acknowledged factual differences between accounts, students in this category were likely to see these differences as building, rather than constraining, our knowledge about an event, much like 'jigsaw pieces' that required piecing

together to lead to ‘a complete picture’ about the past (Saiful, year 9). While the notion of a single factual past remained, students in this category preferred to not privilege one account over another but were predisposed to accepting multiple accounts to *get at* their ‘best version’. Even if the approach was one of combining stories together, such an approach *sees* the possibility of a better account – either in terms of its potential in covering the ‘facts’ better or in its strategy of getting multiple views into one account (or both). In addition, students’ responses appeared to indicate a reasonable ‘decision’ in selecting ‘the better account’, beyond binary moves that favoured only one correct account, or conditional ones that depended on addressing knowledge gaps in accounts.

***We count opinions and average the views (Count opinions)***

Moving beyond the idea that accounts are complementary and served to reinforce each other’s telling of the complete story, student responses in this category (10% or seven students) proposed that singular accounts be viewed as valid expressions of each author’s right to an opinion. Distinct from the previous category, responses in this category have begun to show a clearer strategy or an apparent decisiveness in selecting the better account. Such a strategy, however, was manifested in two ways: at one end (in what may be seen as a ‘low-level’ strategy), this involved seeking some form of consensus among the authors by counting or tallying authors’ positions and seeking to find an *average* to get the majority view. At the other end (and at what may be seen as a ‘higher level’), this strategy involved examining accounts for similar (or agreed-upon) opinions as a way of reaching some form of congruence with the dominant interpretive position.



Responses from all five year 9 students in this category pointed to the belief that taking the side of the majority view was a key indication of whether or not an account is on the right side of the fence. To put it simply, if more people were to support a particular version, then that version would naturally be the better account.

As Gloria, year 9, reasoned in an interview:

Let's say for example there are two different views. Both are acceptable views. But one side has more views, more people saying that it's this particular view. The other side had lesser people agreeing with that view, well, maybe one or two, so obviously the one with the more views is the right one, isn't it?

As seen from Gloria's reasoning, the notion that an account must reside within the majority view in order for it to be deemed correct is not restricted to a matter of taking sides, nor is it necessarily an indication of whether the author was right or wrong in his/her interpretation. Somehow, being on the majority side would bring with it the backing of the prevailing viewpoint (or interpretation), which also may offer that account a guarantee of its credibility. This move to 'side with the majority' not only indicated the importance (especially among younger students) of factual security when evaluating accounts, but it also offered an endorsement of the 'truth' that an account was purported to espouse. In the event that a decision (about that 'truth') could not be easily or straightforwardly made due to some kind of uncertainty, the matter could be resolved by finding an 'average' position. As Lijie, year 9, explained, 'We can decide if an account is better by gathering a number of sources from different people. An average could be taken, if more people supported a particular statement, then it could be classified as true.'

A related strategy which supported the idea of placing accounts within the predominant viewpoint was the suggestion that an account be checked against other authoritative/expert sources for some kind of agreement. Yihan (year 9), for example suggested in an interview that we ‘ask for more opinions from history experts to get a rough idea of which account is better’, while Peihan, also year 9, proposed that we ‘compare the accounts with accounts written by other contemporary historians’. While these proposals may suggest an attempt at corroboration, the basic idea, however, remained the same – that we look for other opinions or accounts to see which of the two views would prevail (in the majority). While some responses hinted at higher-level notions of cross-referencing, the general assumption that ‘the more there is other accounts to back up either of the two accounts’ the more ‘we can be assured of their reliability’ (Shu Kiat, year 9) suggested rather low-level ways of *cataloguing* opinions rather than any serious attempt at corroborating accounts of events.

The two older students in this category, however, seemed to view the issue in slightly more complex ways when they proposed that one account be compared to other historians’ accounts to establish some degree of congruence. For instance, Fatin, year 12, maintained that ‘The consistency and reliability of the stories to the event determines which account is better. By cross-referencing to other accounts we can see how far the story agrees with the stories written by other people.’ For Fatin, the better account must not only be rid of discrepancies or conflicts in the way the story is told, but it also must be congruent with other accounts. Another year 12 student, Ailing, also believed that comparing one account ‘with other accounts’ would make that account ‘more reliable and more substantiated’ as it could be shown

to correspond with ‘the opinion similarly shared by many other historians’. Implicit in Fatin’s and Ailing’s responses was the idea that relating the congruence of the better account to the dominant interpretive position was not a simple matter of counting and stacking accounts into two distinct piles, and then selecting the majority; it involved examining the extent to which the account agreed with what other historians have said about an event.

### **Review Criteria**

#### ***We consider all points of view (Consider all views)***

Students’ attempts at handling multiple and different stories about the past appeared to move towards a *criterial* slant in this category. Even if their responses called for all accounts to be regarded as equally relevant, students in this category (10% or seven students) were less predisposed to combining multiple accounts or cataloguing majority positions. Instead, the responses of students in this category tended to be different mainly because they appeared to put forward a strategy to select the better account by considering multiple points of view. Responses seemed to hint at some kind of tentative criteria that may indicate moves to differentiate between one (valid) point of view and another.

An allusion to a criterion that may be used to decide on the better account was by considering an account’s *objective* point of view to others that appeared as *biased* towards a particular viewpoint. Roz, year 9, for example, argued that ‘the better account is objective in providing the details and is not biased’. Chengyi, year 9, clarified this idea of a ‘more objective’ account in terms of accounts that were

‘neutral’, ‘fact-based’ and ones that also provide ‘a fair and balanced viewpoint’. In linking notions of an account’s objectivity to the viewpoint of the author, what counted as a better account as Michelle, year 12, stressed, was the writer’s even-handed treatment of the story: ‘if the writer has a very unbalanced view regarding something, then he is probably not as reliable as another writer with a balanced viewpoint’. What these three students understood by the terms *objective* or *objectivity* remained difficult to ascertain, other than perhaps a suggestion of the author’s personal disengagement or neutrality, as well as his/her commitment to *fairness* (by not taking sides) in the telling of the story.

One student, however, interpreted objectivity not only in terms of a methodological detachment in the process of reporting, but also in terms of a balanced perspective of the coverage. Zhi Yon, year 9, explained his notion of a better point of view:

Story 2 is the better account because it gives a more objective way of producing its account by stepping out of China and seeing China from the outside. It therefore offers an outsider’s view for a more objective account. Story 1 is too narrow in its view about the effects of the navy’s loss. It projected the effects of dismantlement only into the 16<sup>th</sup> century and unlike Story 2, did not consider external relations or external developments outside China.

From Zhi Yon’s response, two suppositions about an account’s objective status emerged: first, if the account was written from an outsider’s perspective, and seen as free from the personal biases and the presumed insularity of a localised perspective, this would consequentially enhance the *objectivity* of the account. Second, if the account was written from a narrower perspective, brought about by lack of scope and ignoring aspects that other accounts had dealt with, that account’s *objectivity status*

may subsequently come under serious question. Zhi Yon's ideas appeared to be supported by Timothy, year 9, who argued that such accounts also were better as they 'encompassed a greater view and various opinions'. He reasoned that 'by including Western views and the standpoint of someone outside China, Story 2 can be regarded as better as it offers a more realistic and a wider range of viewpoints.' Conversely then, an account that was written from a 'limited standpoint' and did not include other viewpoints was seen as inferior and 'short-sighted' as it would likely fail to 'examine aspects of an event from many different angles' (Michelle, year 12).

In weighing the different points of view in historical accounts, however, three students appeared to take a slightly different approach. While they acknowledged the importance of a balanced viewpoint in an account, they also raised the idea of the better viewpoint as one that appealed to or fit the readers' own perspectives or stances on the matter. For Melvina, year 12, for example, authors produced accounts to influence the readers of their respective points of view; the better account would thus be the one that could convince the reader to 'share the subjective views of their authors'. Xueying, year 12, however, contended that such reader choices also were bounded by the accessibility of the account to the personal expectations and perspectives of the reader. She believed that the readers' own intellectual disposition or mental expectations would most likely determine the better account as he/she could tell 'if the author's viewpoint and the account's description of events allow us to have a better understanding of the situation at that point in history'. This would depend then on the 'the issues you have in mind'. As she explained,

If you want the view that provides a balance of events to show that the expeditions do not matter as much, then account A (Story 1) would be

better. But if you want the view that talks about the impact of the expedition on the country, then account B (Story 2) would seem to be more insightful.

In pointing to the issues or questions that the reader has in mind, Xueying's response, in particular, begins to touch on the idea of accounts as answering 'questions' about specific issues, making the move that she suggested, a criterial one. For her, deciding on a better account was not simply a case where 'the person reading it can understand about what happened'; it suggested awareness of *perspectival* differences in accounts – that may specifically guide readers' choices when choosing the better account.

*We examine the historian (Examine historian)*

In considering ways to decide the better account, some students had placed the study of the historians at the centre of any strategy aimed at making distinctions between accounts. Responses in this category (13% or nine students) acknowledged that accounts were inextricably linked to the different perspectives or varied viewpoints of their creators. Nonetheless, rather than simply selecting the one with a 'balanced viewpoint' – which in the previous category tended to be used more as an 'averaging' position – students in this category saw such a viewpoint more as a 'halfway' position, upon which other aspects (specific to authorship issues) such as examining the historian's background, professional competence and individual beliefs had to be open to scrutiny. By placing the historian within their personal and socio-political contexts, and considering how these contexts may invariably influence the accounts they create, students appeared to demonstrate a distinct awareness of an account's constructed nature. As Vincent, year 9, explained,

All historians are affected by their beliefs – such as their religion and creed – and also their biases towards certain things. These have been ingrained in them since young. They would not be able to totally disregard this no matter how experienced they are as historians. Some of these historians may also have their national and regional interests at heart and so may choose to write portrayals of history just to fit their designs.

For Vincent, some historians may be swayed more by personal beliefs, national loyalties and historical legacies than by certain standards of professional practice. Each account would need to be examined in terms of the extent to which it was influenced by its author's apparent biases, prejudices and ideological leanings. The better account would then be possible to select – by distinguishing accounts that were written based on some personal criteria from those that were written in accordance to certain professional standards as set by other historians.

Nonetheless, examining a historian's upbringing and beliefs may not sufficiently allow students to straightforwardly decide on the better account. For students like Janet and Chen Peng (both year 12), knowing the historians' proficiency in their fields, as well as the degree of their professional acumen, also were important considerations. Often, a historian's proficiency was linked to his/her capacity to produce *accurate* accounts of past events in his/her area of expertise. Going by this assumption, only professional historians (and those who were deemed as an authority or experts in their respective fields of study) could be trusted with writing proper history stories about the past. As Chen Peng explained:

If he is new in the field or he does not have sufficient experience, the historian may make different inferences as compared to others who

are more experienced in the field, and so his inferences are also likely to be inaccurate.

For students like Chen Peng, accounts written by ‘experienced historians’ should (almost automatically) be regarded as better accounts as these historians would have spent years improving their practice, and have acquired the versatility and the wisdom to ‘understand the cultures and the societies they write about’ (Lynn, year 9). Such knowledge and profundity would, in contrast, be lacking in ‘new historians’, who would expectedly make ‘poor inferences’ due to their inexperience and lack of exposure in the field (Chen Peng).

Students in this category appeared to abide by E.H. Carr’s (1987) instruction to study the historian first before studying the facts. By suggesting that we investigate the historians’ motives, scrutinizing their social and political backgrounds and beliefs, as well as considering their professional training, these students may appear to have a keener sense of strategy and seemed to demonstrate awareness of accounts as constructions that are based on some notions of standards of professional practice. Yet, even if such an approach appeared to indicate a more sophisticated position in terms of thinking about accounts, it nevertheless restricted evaluative choices simply to the study of the authors’ divergent backgrounds, subjective positions and comparative (or relative) experiences. While the approach opened up the possibility of viewing accounts in ‘construction’ terms, suggestions about *construction standards* remained implicit, with responses pointing mainly to authorship matters as criteria to decide between accounts.



*We consider construction standards as criteria*

Responses by students in this category (approximately 9% or six students) appeared to indicate a distinct shift from simply evaluating accounts based on their authors' personal and professional attributes, to considerations that included authorial selection and aspects of textual construction. Most evident among students' responses was the explicit recognition of possible construction standards that may be crucial when deciding between accounts. Considerations of the better account included (as criteria) the constructional nature of accounts, and in particular, the standards of practice that placed restrictions on the historian's freedom to create his/her accounts of past events.

Two students, for example, argued that accounts must be seen in terms of a set of selection criteria their authors have imposed, which both framed and bounded the textual constructions of events. As Earth, year 12, explained, 'each historian would have a different focus or different goals in writing the accounts' and so would likely 'make selections' in terms of the issues that were suitably relevant to his/her interests. As such, accounts could be seen as selective constructions of specific moments in history that were inextricably connected to what their authors were seeking to discover. Deciding on the better account would then involve evaluating the extent to which each account had achieved the goals it had set out to do. One way to do this, according to Cedric, year 12, was by 'analyzing both accounts to see which account better satisfies or answers the requirements or questions'. He illustrated this idea in an interview,

If we want to decide which account is better, we would have to see how well each account had answered the question the historian wanted to answer. If we were to look at both stories, they addressed different concerns. Story 1, for example, talks about the development of internal politics within China. We could ask if the account had provided us with relevant information and argument about that aspect. If we want to compare both accounts to find out which account provides us with a more thorough interpretation about the impact of the naval expeditions and the effects of dismantling the navy, then we will have to establish some basis for comparison.

Both Earth and Cedric seemed to indicate some awareness of the nature of accounts as being limited by the questions that governed their constructions. Cedric's response, especially, pointed to his recognition that accounts are written to fit certain selection criteria set by their authors, and that this necessarily limited the kinds of answers it could offer. He also seemed to recognize that accounts served to answer different sets of questions (specific to authors' choice and selection), and were constructed to perform different tasks for different audiences. A decision about the better account then must not only take into consideration how well each account tells the story, but also the relative worth of each account in providing answers based on the criteria or authorial decisions that shaped its construction.

Jeremy, year 12, however, believed that the ability to decide on the better account also rested on the reader's ability to discern notions of plausibility and logical arguments in accounts. He explained in an interview,

...we assess the historical account to see if it makes sense in the first place [...] we can look at the arguments and see which account provided the strongest substantiation [...] or whichever evidence or

ideas that can actually be substantiated by other sources. We can then consider which line of argument that they are pushing for and whether we think the arguments are plausible. But the reader will have to decide on his own which argument is the better one. So in that case, it's pretty much a critical thinking process. The analysis is supposed to guide the mind into taking those positions.

While acknowledging that readers' positions may be subjective and open to interpretative inclinations, Jeremy highlighted the importance of certain 'critical thinking' processes or an analytical methodology that may assist the reader in making such choices. In viewing accounts in *constructional* terms that are subject to certain criteria or standards of working practice, Jeremy understood that familiarity with the processes involved in evaluating accounts was essential in assisting readers to determine the relative worth of each account.

By considering accounts as historians' (re-)constructions of events, students in this category seemed to recognize that certain standards or criteria could be used to distinguish, and to subsequently select, better accounts. Some of these criteria may include differentiating accounts based on the questions they were constructed to answer, evaluating accounts based on the standards of argument (such as the plausibility of explanations or the interpretation of evidence), and appraising accounts based on attributes that adhered to explicit standards of professional practice. By thinking about accounts in 'criterial' terms, these students demonstrated quite sophisticated understandings, which may allow them to formulate careful, deliberative strategies when making sense of the many ways accounts in history may differ – as contradictory, rival and competing, complementary, and so on.

## 5.4 Discussion

The analysis of students' responses had led to the emergence of several groups of ideas about students' understandings of accounts that may be used to build a schema to demonstrate the range of these ideas or understandings. First, apart from a category that viewed accounts as not really different so long as they were 'about the same thing', most students were likely to explain *differences between accounts* across three broad categories, namely 'knowledge deficits', 'multiple stories' and 'constructional attributes'. Second, in response to the issue of *deciding between accounts*, students were likely to view the better account across three identifiable broader groups, namely, to find the 'best version', to 'merge and tally' accounts, and to 'review the criteria' used in making a decision.

Constructing these schematic accounts of understandings, however, does not presuppose the notion that students' ideas or ways of thinking about accounts would fit the categories nicely or neatly; in fact, coding for the highest response often proved problematic as students' ideas were rarely singular – sometimes they 'latch-on' to seemingly high-order ideas which may prove more to be 'borrowed ideas' (that is, ones used without being fully understood) than genuine evidence of the existence of such ideas. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the ideas that students in this study appeared to be operating with are coherent or stable enough for any hypothetical constructs to be securely produced. Research of this nature can only suggest the moves that children make, and not so much provide direct access to children's ideas. Hence, the categories that were constructed to demonstrate students' responses in this study may be seen to be provisional mappings of students'

broad ideas, that is, they show the ideas students in Singapore are likely to hold given the social, cultural and educational circumstances at the moment. Seen in this light, these categories of response may be seen to be valid only at the group level and not as individual pictures of respective students. More specifically, each response category highlighted the kinds of ideas that students in the study appeared to be working with (within the circumstances set by the Research Question), and not a claim that those were the best ideas that they were operating with (under any other circumstances).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the approach to the research design and data analysis adopted in this study were influenced by procedures associated with grounded theory, and informed by many other theoretical (and empirical) assumptions. These included a theoretical framework based on constructivist ideas about learning, key findings from learning sciences research (principally, *How People Learn* and progression in learning studies), as well as philosophical conceptions about the nature of historical knowledge (in Chapter 1). Data analysis, categorizations of responses, and descriptive accounts of students' ideas were made on the basis of age-related distinctions and what is conceived as ideas that are 'more powerful' than others (see p.143-144).

Three important observations may be addressed within the context of the findings in this chapter. First, the range of ideas students (in this study) held about the nature of accounts may be said to correspond to a largely 'factual-to-criterial' continuum, with a 'multiple' stage in-between that pointed to either 'factual' or 'criterial' ways of viewing accounts. Second, knowing about students' ideas would have certain

implications for teaching and learning, as some of these ideas may be seen to possibly impede or potentially develop students' understandings of accounts in history. And third, distinct shifts in students' ideas about accounts and historical knowledge may reflect a development or a 'progression' that increased in terms of levels of *sophistication* (with students acquiring more powerful ways of looking at accounts as they moved into the 'criterial' range). The next two sub-sections offer a discussion of some generalizations (limited to the responses of students in the sample) about students' ideas and understandings in the context of these observations.

#### *5.4.1 Making sense of students' ideas about accounts: A factual-to-criterial continuum*

The available data suggests that there may be an apparent *shift* in terms of the development of students' ideas about accounts (as seen in Figures 5.7 and 5.8 below). This shift, however, appeared to be a matter of changes in response patterns with age across the two year groups. For example, when considering students' ideas about different accounts (in Figure 5.7), their responses appeared to demonstrate a shift from treating the issue of *differences* as *factual* (resulting largely from the lack of requisite knowledge), through conceiving it as a complex issue involving a composite of *multiple* versions (of a still single/factual past), to explaining different accounts in *criterial* terms (by taking into consideration construction standards).

Figure 5.7: Distribution of student responses in explaining differences between accounts (by percentages in year groups across a 'factual-to-criterial' continuum)

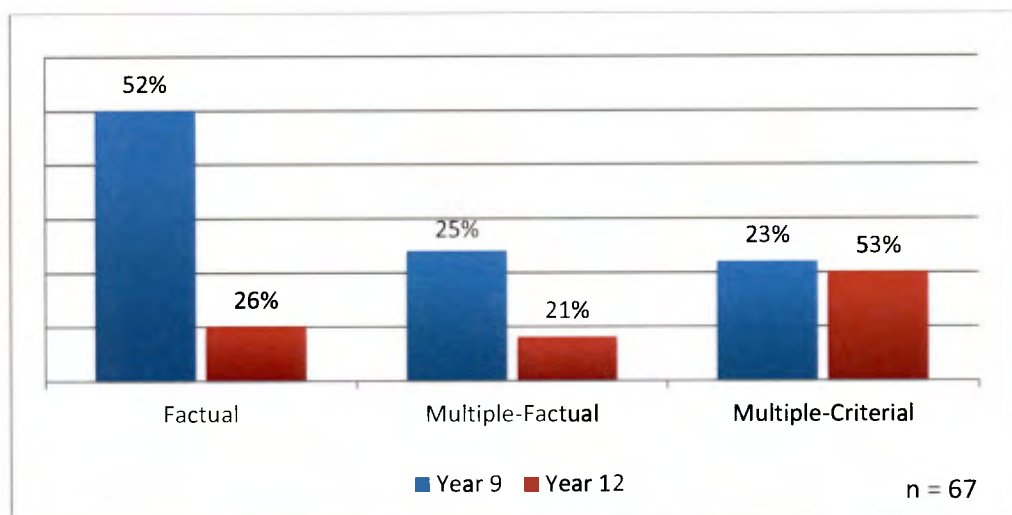
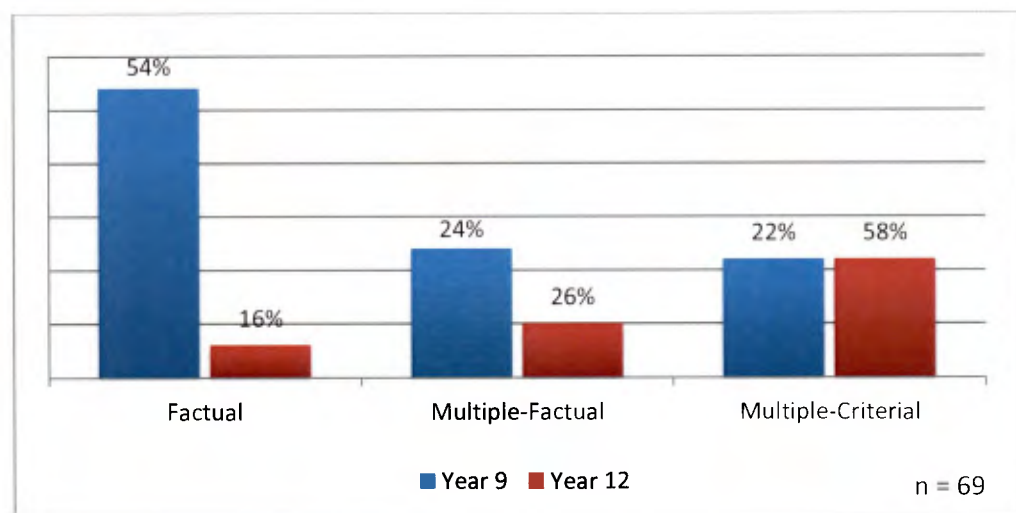


Figure 5.8: Distribution of student responses when deciding between accounts (by percentages in year groups across a 'factual-to-criterial' continuum)



A similar pattern appeared to take shape when considering students' evaluative moves regarding the better account (in Figure 5.8): from managing the issue as one that required the checking and verification of *factual* information, through dealing with the issue in terms of handling and collating *multiple* accounts, to considering strategies that may distinguish between accounts by working with different authorial

or textual *criteria*. In both confluences, age-related patterns provided some evidence indicative of a shift, where older students seemed better able to deal with more complex ideas about accounts than younger one. This shift – in and through the age differences – appeared to echo some findings from the CHATA project (Lee, 2001), suggesting similarities between the ideas Singapore students may hold (about accounts) with their British counterparts.

Viewing students' ways of looking at accounts using this broader 'factual-to-criterial' framework also may provide some suggestions as to the possible ways students' may conceive the nature of historical knowledge and history learning. Table 5.7 provides a summary as to what these (largely inferred) ideas and views were likely to be in the context of student responses in the study. Bearing in mind the age-related progression of ideas between year 9 and year 12 students, this summary of students' ways of thinking about history may be useful in providing teachers with a clearer sense of what is at issue when addressing students' ideas in their teaching, and the possible development of ideas across year-groups. The 'factual-to-criterial' depiction of students' ways of thinking as provided in Table 5.7 also may allow teachers to have a snapshot of the likely ideas students hold about accounts, historical knowledge and history learning.

Table 5.7: A summary of students' ways of thinking about accounts, historical knowledge and history learning derived from an analysis of written and interview data

	How students think about accounts	Implicit view of historical knowledge	Views about history learning & historical inquiry
<b>Factual</b>	Accounts are 'copies' of a fixed and objective past – accounts exist as a collection of facts (that are correct or incorrect representations of a singular reality).	Historical knowledge is fixed and given and exists as exact representations of the past; the knowledge is 'there' to be acquired but may not be directly accessible, producing false or distorted stories.	History learning is about knowing what happened in the past (i.e. learning the correct narrative). Historical inquiry is a practice that is designed to capture the past accurately and 'as it really was'.



<b>Multiple-Factual</b>	Accounts are multiple versions of a past that is complex and multi-faceted; they reflect the different opinions and experiences of their authors and serve as partial stories of a factual past.	Historical knowledge is produced by human minds, based partly on individual dispositions, experiences and perspectives. The knowledge is uncertain, and largely corresponds to the owner's personal conception of the past.	History learning is about knowing versions of the past through interpreted narratives. Historical inquiry offers an opportunity to study multiple and diverse versions of a complex past.
<b>Multiple-Criterial</b>	Accounts are selective interpretations of events, (re-) constructions that can be evaluated according to a set of standards or criteria – like evidence, argument and story parameters.	Historical knowledge is constructed by human minds, based on an interpretation of available evidence. The knowledge is tentative and is open to questioning and evaluation based on standards and criteria used by the community of scholars.	History learning is about understanding perspectives and acquiring the heuristics to explore, interpret and understand the past. Historical inquiry is a practice that attempts to make the past intelligible through systematic and rigorous examination of evidence.

*A factual-to-criterial continuum in viewing students' ideas about the nature of accounts*

The combined categories in Table 5.8 below represent a 'high inference' interpretation of the data and as such although requiring caution, may offer useful starting points to think about the ways students may view the nature of accounts. In viewing these ideas across a 'factual-to-criterial' continuum, it may be possible for us to build a crude model of development about students' preconceptions that takes note of key shifts in the range of their ideas about accounts. As a position in-between, the 'multiple' stage pointed to both 'factual' *and* 'multiple' ways of viewing the nature of accounts, that is, students may accept the multiplicity of accounts but also may view them in factual terms (as different versions of a single past). More important, however, is the idea that acquiring 'multiple' ways of looking at accounts may be seen as a necessary precondition in order for students to start to view historical accounts in criterial terms. It is only when students can accept that there can be multiple accounts of events, can they also understand that it is in the nature of accounts to be different, and subsequently to figure out ways to adjudicate

and arbitrate between different accounts. The following sub-sections provide a brief discussion of each ‘way of thinking’.

Table 5.8: Categories combined: A possible way of looking at students’ ideas about the nature of accounts

		Why different?	How do we decide?
<b>Factual</b>	1	<b>Same stuff so not different</b> <i>Accounts are not different if they are about the same thing.</i>	<b>n/a</b> <i>No need to decide between accounts since they are talking about the same thing.</i>
<b>Factual</b>	2	<b>Some wrong</b> <i>Accounts may be different but there is only one ‘correct’ account of an event, the others must be ‘wrong’.</i>	<b>Look for the best copy</b> <i>We look for the version that is more ‘correct’ or ‘true’ and corresponds to the factual past.</i>
	3	<b>All could be wrong</b> <i>There are different accounts but we may not know which one is ‘true’ since there’s no way to verify.</i>	<b>Can’t decide in principle</b> <i>There’s no way to decide as we do not have direct access to the past and it is impossible to read people’s minds.</i>
	4	<b>Knowledge problem</b> <i>There are different accounts because of problems acquiring knowledge about the past.</i>	<b>Try and find more stuff</b> <i>We try and plug up the ‘gaps’ in historical knowledge by looking at alternative sources of information.</i>
<b>Factual-Multiple</b>	5	<b>Complex past = partial stories</b> <i>Different accounts are ‘partial stories’ that work together to form a ‘complete’ picture about the past.</i>	<b>Combine stories together</b> <i>We incorporate all accounts to get to a ‘truer’ or more complete picture of the past.</i>
	6	<b>Multiple versions (opinion)</b> <i>Accounts are different because authors have different opinions about the past.</i>	<b>Count opinions or average views</b> <i>We take a consensus among authors by counting their opinions and choose the majority view.</i>
<b>Multiple-Criterial</b>	7	<b>Implicit recognition of criterion: Point of view</b> <i>Different accounts exist because of legitimate differences in the authors’ points of view.</i>	<b>Accept all points of view (relativism)</b> <i>Not desirable to decide – we should accept all accounts as points of view that are equally relevant and equally valid.</i>
	8	<b>Implicit recognition of alternative criterion: Authorship</b> <i>Accounts are legitimately different because historians interpret things differently.</i>	<b>Examine the historian’s background</b> <i>We examine the historian’s background, socio-cultural contexts, beliefs and professional competence.</i>
	9	<b>Recognition of explicit construction</b> <i>Accounts are (re-)constructions by historians bounded by selection, story parameters and other criterial standards. It is in the nature of accounts to be different</i>	<b>Consider construction standards as criteria</b> <i>Explicitly recognise construction standards as crucial in deciding, such as the standards of argument, parameters of story, plausibility of explanations &amp; interpretation of evidence.</i>

### *A 'factual' approach to viewing history*

Students who approached the issue of accounts in a *factual* manner were likely to regard historical accounts as 'copies' of a fixed past. For these students, stories about the past are treated simply as another set of facts. Seen in this light, historical accounts existed as a collection of facts that were either correct or incorrect 'representations' of that single reality. Apparent differences were attributed to factual inconsistencies within (and between) accounts, and more specifically, on their *knowledge deficits*. Deciding the better account entailed looking for the *best version* of the past amongst weaker accounts that were deemed factually deficient. Arguably, these students worked with the assumption that 'history' and 'the past' are one and the same. Very likely, for them, knowledge about the past is straightforwardly available, fixed and could be reproduced (mostly textually) as exact 'copies'; false or distorted stories, then, are a consequence of historians not getting their facts 'right'.

Many of these students seemed to have not only a fixed conception of the past, but also a rigid notion of 'truth' in what should count as historical knowledge (that is, for example, accounts should be based only on 'correct facts'). Such ideas, however, would lead to the closing down of history as they would not allow students to understand what is involved in knowing and reconstructing accounts of the past. Students, for example, would fail to recognize that it is simply not possible to know all the relevant facts in history, but even then, knowledge about the past can still be reconstructed through an interpretation of the evidence (based on the traces that are left by those who had lived that past). Furthermore, students who insist on the factual basis of any account that claims to offer valid versions of the past also may end up

not being able to handle situations where they faced two accounts of the same event, both making only true statements but differed in the stories they tell.

*A 'multiple-factual' approach to viewing history*

Students who approached the issue of accounts in terms of *multiple stories* were likely to acknowledge a past that is complex and multifaceted. For these students, different accounts were natural and worked in a favourable way, that is, they served to complement or reinforce the telling of the (complete) story, albeit one that was viewed in 'factual' terms. Based on some of the responses in this study, students who viewed history in a 'multiple-factual' way would likely use either of two 'strategies' to decide on the better account: a) to incorporate all accounts to build 'a more complete story'; or b) to count accounts and pick the majority position. Nevertheless, these strategies pointed more to expedient or practical options at reconciling differences; handling multiple stories remained a matter of finding the best means to 'fit' accounts into the proper scheme of things (such as a complete picture or the best story out there).

Responses of students in the study suggested that even if they were content to accept all accounts as valid productions of the human mind – made up mostly of individual dispositions, experiences and opinions – merging these accounts together pointed to the possibility of a better (or best) account. The assumption underlying this belief is the idea that the integration of disparate or partial accounts would lead to the consolidation of factual knowledge and the inclusion of multiple perspectives (into a more complete or 'truer' picture of the past). This idea, however, ignored notions of a complex past as 'different things happening in different places at the same time', as

students were more predisposed to define the complicated past mainly in terms of the ‘different opinions’ or ‘different experiences’ of their authors.

#### *A ‘criterial’ approach to viewing history*

Students who approached the issue of different accounts in a *criterial* manner were likely to understand that accounts are essentially interpretations and selective (re)constructions of past events. These students recognized that constructing historical accounts imposed limits on authors, and also subjected their choices to certain standards of practice. Deciding on the better account, then, required students to *review the criteria* used to construct accounts. For these students, differentiating between accounts went beyond thinking about accounts as ‘different, but having one correct story’ but that of ‘different stories distinguishable by criteria’. The recognition that historical knowledge is constructed, and is based on interpretation of evidence, allowed students to view historical accounts as tentative and open to challenge. Such recognition opens up the possibility of history as a defensible kind of knowledge, with its own disciplinary rules and standards of construction.

#### *5.4.2 Progression in students’ ideas and understandings about historical accounts*

The analysis and discussion of students’ responses in this Chapter have pointed to, among other things, two related observations: first, students in the study have a range of ideas or preconceptions about the nature of accounts in history; and second, some of these ideas may count as misconceptions (and would remain as such if not challenged). Looking at the response categories in Table 5.8 (p.201), the shifts that may be detected in the range of students’ ideas in the sample suggest the possibility of viewing the development of these ideas in terms of a ‘progression’ that increased

in levels of sophistication. Seen within the hierarchical framework and considering the age-related differences, three notable shifts could be seen: first, a shift from a ‘quantitative’ response that involved the acquisition of information or content knowledge, to a ‘qualitative’ one that pointed to improved conceptions or understandings about accounts; second, a shift in the nature of students’ ideas from ‘less powerful’ ideas that appeared to ‘close down’ history. to ‘more powerful’ or ‘sophisticated’ ones that may allow history to go on; and third, a shift from a ‘factual’ way of looking at history and the past, to a ‘criterial’ way that recognized the constructed nature of history and the importance of evaluating historical knowledge based on certain standards of professional practice. Importantly, the response categories that were developed appeared to mirror (in slightly different ways) the ideas that the CHATA researchers had developed and that Lee & Shemilt had outlined in their model of progression (see Chapter 1, p.41). Key to their findings were the clear shifts in children’s ideas about why accounts differed which could be mapped across six ‘levels’ of progression in understandings. Table 5.9 outlines the schema (in adapted form) below:

Table 5.9: Adapted schema of Lee & Shemilt’s (2004) progression in ideas about accounts

1	Accounts are just (given) stories
2	Accounts fail to be copies of a past we cannot witness
3	Accounts are accurate copies of the past, except for mistakes or gaps
4	Accounts may be distorted for ulterior motives
5	Accounts are organized from a personal viewpoint
6	Accounts must answer questions and fit criteria

Also important, is that recent research into students' ideas and understandings about accounts in history carried out in the UK, Taiwan and Portugal had pointed to similar parallels. Research by Chapman (2009), Gago (2005) and Hsiao (2008), and as well as Taiwanese researchers in Project CHIN (cited in Hsiao, 2008), suggested similar findings even though these studies had differed in terms of context, scale, research goals and instruments. Generally, these researchers agreed that students have a range of preconceptions about accounts, and that the patterns of students' ideas as well as the apparent shifts in these ideas may indicate the possibility of viewing students' understandings in terms of progression in ideas about accounts.

One implication that the shifts in students' ideas may have for teaching is the suggestion that knowing the range of students' responses across a progression model (such as the one shown in Table 5.8 and those presented by other international researchers) could offer opportunities for the development of more advanced understandings both within and across categories. As the notion of 'progression' in students' historical thinking does not presuppose the rejection or dismissal of lower-level ideas, each range of ideas may be treated as potential building blocks, stepping stones or starting points to further understandings. Compartmentalizing the range of students' ideas in this study into a 'factual-to-criterial' continuum also helped to illustrate how such a progression in understanding may take shape when considering students' thinking about accounts. As ideas move from the 'factual' to the 'criterial' – over time, across age-groups and as a consequence of explicit teaching – students may be said to have acquired 'more powerful' ways of looking at historical accounts, described by Lee & Shemilt (2007) as abandoning ideas that 'bring history to a



grinding halt' and developing ones that would allow history to 'go on' (as a form of knowledge that is both valid and defensible).

For teachers, such a process would involve identifying (and subsequently helping to discard) students' misconceptions and build proper ideas that may support more criterial ways of understanding accounts. By viewing students' preconceptions as 'starting points' in their understandings, teachers could identify certain ideas that may appear to 'block' students' understandings, and consider how these may be used to 'build' further understandings about accounts. For example, a very simplified but robust range might describe students' ideas about different accounts as: a) No difference; b) Different but one story; c) Different, multiple stories but one past; and d) Different, multiple stories judged by criteria. Knowing that some students may be working with 'low-order', uni-dimensional conceptions of accounts would enable teachers to devise teaching strategies that could gradually move students' understandings from the 'factual' range to the 'criterial' range. One of the first tasks for the teacher, then, is to recognize some ideas that run the potential of 'closing down' the possibility of history, and figure out ways to manage these ideas so that students could begin to view history as a defensible form of knowledge. A key strategy (as proposed by the first key principle in *How People Learn*) would be for teachers to help draw out possible misconceptions and develop ways to help students build proper understandings.



## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the ideas that Singapore students (in the sample group) appeared to hold when explaining differences and arbitrating between accounts based on the research focus as set out in the Introduction (p.12-13). Nine response categories were used to analyze how students viewed differences between accounts, and eight response categories were constructed to demonstrate students' likely moves when asked to decide between accounts. The categories revealed certain age-related shifts in students' thinking across the two year-groups that ranged broadly from viewing accounts in 'factual' terms, to differentiating accounts in terms of 'criterial' relevance.

A study of these categories (and the mapping of students' preconceptions) pointed to the possibility of viewing the development of students' understandings about accounts across a model of progression in ideas. Like sheep paths seen from high above (Shemilt, 1980), such a mapping may be useful in providing a preliminary framework of students' prior ideas and the ways different groups of students may view the nature of accounts. A progression model of this nature also has considerable heuristic importance as it provides teachers with useful reference points to address students' ideas and to potentially develop their ideas towards more advanced understandings. One difficulty with a progression model, however, is that the ideas that could be captured in the 'levels' may not be exhaustive, and difficulties would emerge when we consider possible nuances in students' ideas or the presence of other related ideas that get entangled within students' ideas about accounts. As a result, such models could only provide descriptors for the ideas (but not set indicators to get *at* the descriptors). Progression models, then, should not be treated

as ‘ready-made’ assessment schemes to be taught ‘step-by-step’ or as attainment targets (Lee & Shemilt, 2007). Instead, these models would best serve as suggestions for distinct shifts in students’ ideas to guide teachers in planning syllabus, instruction and assessment to match the different levels of competencies and attainments.

Researchers broadly agree that learners *construct* their conceptual understandings from prior knowledge but some may disagree on the ways to use this notion to improve learning (Roschelle, 1995). As the authors of *How People Learn* affirmed, new knowledge always builds upon a foundation of prior knowledge and experience (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 1999). The onus, then, would be on teachers to identify the preconceptions that may be used as stepping stones to develop further understandings. Based on the discussion in this chapter, one way to do this may be for teachers to identify students’ ‘starting points’ (in terms of their preconceptions) and to draw out ideas that might impede understandings or ones that could be used to facilitate better understandings. Yet, such an approach would be dependent on teachers in Singapore not only viewing the teaching and learning of history in terms of developing students’ ideas and understandings about history, but also planning instruction with their students’ prior ideas in mind. The next chapter analyzes data collected from teachers’ responses in the study to explore the teachers’ assumptions about their students’ ideas about accounts, and to examine the extent to which history teachers in the sample group were likely to view historical instruction in terms of developing their students’ understandings about accounts.

## Chapter 6: Exploring teachers' assumptions about students' ideas about history and historical accounts

### 6.1 Introduction

The descriptive analysis of students' ideas in the previous chapter has shed light on the range of ideas students in Singapore appear to work with when dealing with the nature of accounts in history. The patterns of ideas also suggest possible shifts in student thinking, and provide opportunities for teachers to uncover alternative preconceptions that may be useful in helping students develop more sophisticated and complex ideas about accounts. Nevertheless, the preliminary observations made in Chapter 4 have pointed to a lack of awareness among Singapore teachers about students' conceptions of accounts. This chapter builds upon the observations made earlier in the pilot reports and analyzes teachers' ideas and assumptions using data collected through survey questions as well as in-depth interviews with history teachers. The chapter explores teachers' ideas about aspects of students' thinking in history, and in particular, examines teachers' assumptions about their students' ideas about the nature of accounts. In the course of the discussion, the chapter will suggest, more speculatively, ways to look at teachers' ideas within the context of their teaching goals and the desirability of developing an instruction that is based on an awareness of students' preconceptions.

## 6.2 A note on the analytical process and the development of categories

As mentioned in earlier chapters, this study was designed, in part, to discover teachers' assumptions about the kinds of ideas and understandings their students are likely to bring into the classroom. To that end, the analytical focus undertaken in this section of the study was concerned with exploring two key aspects of teacher thinking about students' ideas about history and historical accounts. The first aspect involved 'uncovering' teachers' assumptions about students' prior ideas and their awareness of the kinds of preconceptions students have about accounts. The second aspect examined the extent to which teachers in the sample were likely to view their students' ideas as constraining or facilitating the development of proper understandings about accounts in history. Using responses from a Questionnaire survey of 93 teachers, data analysis focused, first, on examining the *degree of awareness* teachers in Singapore may have about their students' understandings of accounts. Subsequently, interview data with nine teachers in the main study was used to supplement the development of key ideas, as well as to provide a more in-depth analysis of teachers' ideas about student thinking (see Table 3.3 and discussion on data collection methods in Chapter 3, p.96 onwards).

The reasons for limiting the discussion to the two key aspects mentioned above are three-fold: first, constraints of space set practical limits to what could be discussed. Second, whatever claims that are made in the study must necessarily be clearly evidenced by the existing empirical data, and made in response to the research questions that formed the basis of the research design. Finally, a key criterion for decisions about selection from a range of possible analyses was the likely importance

of findings for practice, that is, the kind of knowledge about student learning that would be important for teachers.

In exploring teachers' assumptions about students' ideas, one important concern that emerged was the extent to which teachers considered prior ideas as *helpful* in enabling them to plan teaching strategies that would help develop students' understandings of accounts. The approach to data analysis included exploring the range of teacher assumptions about students' preconceptions (including if they had any) across four options, namely, whether such prior ideas a) got in the way of teaching; b) posed problems for learning; c) helped students understand better; or if these ideas d) had minimal influence on teaching. Another research concern that emerged was the extent to which teachers considered students' pre-existing ideas as *useful* in helping them understand the nature of accounts in history. The approach taken during data analysis to address this concern was to chart teachers' assumptions about students' ideas via a 'Simple' or 'Complex' dichotomy, that is, to see whether these prior ideas needed changing or developing (i.e. Simple), or if the ideas were useful already or sophisticated (i.e. Complex). In both lines of enquiry, the strategy used to develop categories of responses was based on notions of teacher *awareness* of students' prior ideas and pre-existing understandings. Some pertinent questions that were asked as part of the analytical process included the following:

- What sort of assumptions do teachers in Singapore have about their students' ideas and understandings of history and historical accounts? Is there a range of assumptions/expectations about students' ideas/understandings?

- How far do teachers in Singapore think in terms of key ideas that may impede or support students' understandings of accounts? If so, what do they think?
- In what ways can teachers' assumptions about their students' ideas about accounts be said to be congruent with students' understandings in this study?

### **6.3 Analyzing the questionnaire data to map out teachers' ideas about students' understandings of accounts**

As mentioned, the results of the pilot studies suggested that teachers' ideas about student understandings of accounts were quite varied and may hinge upon the teachers' own beliefs as to how far an understanding of accounts constituted *essential knowledge* for students. For the most part, however, there is evidence to show that the teachers in the pilot study had not thought much about issues surrounding the nature of historical accounts, or about their students' ideas about accounts (see Chapter 4). Using data gathered through mostly open-ended questions in the Teachers' Questionnaire (see Appendix-set 2/2a), this section examines teachers' ideas about students' understandings of accounts with these questions in mind:

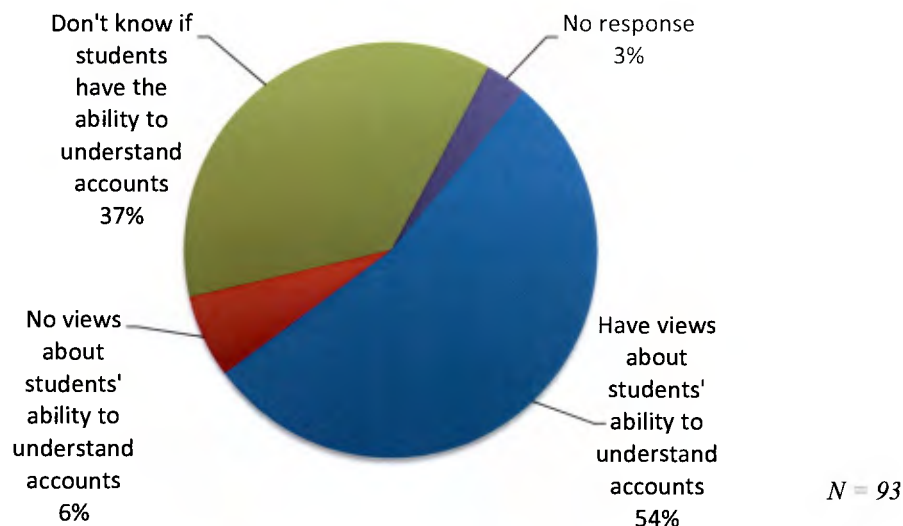
1. What are teachers' views regarding their students' ability to understand the nature and status of accounts?
2. What conceptions about accounts do teachers think students have that constrain or facilitate the development of their understandings? and
3. How do teachers distinguish a 'Simple' idea students have about accounts from one that is 'Complex'?

In explaining categories of responses, *pseudonyms* were given to questionnaire respondents when quoting their specific responses.

### 6.3.1 Teachers' views regarding students' ability to understand the nature of accounts: As deficiencies and constraints

As demonstrated in Figure 6.1 below, only 50 teachers (54%) responded in an affirmative manner (i.e. those who responded with a 'Yes') when asked if they had developed views about their students' ability to understand the nature of accounts in history (see Question 10 in the Teachers' Questionnaire).

Figure 6.1: Distribution of teachers' survey response to Question 10 regarding their views about students' ability to understand the nature and status of accounts (by percentage)



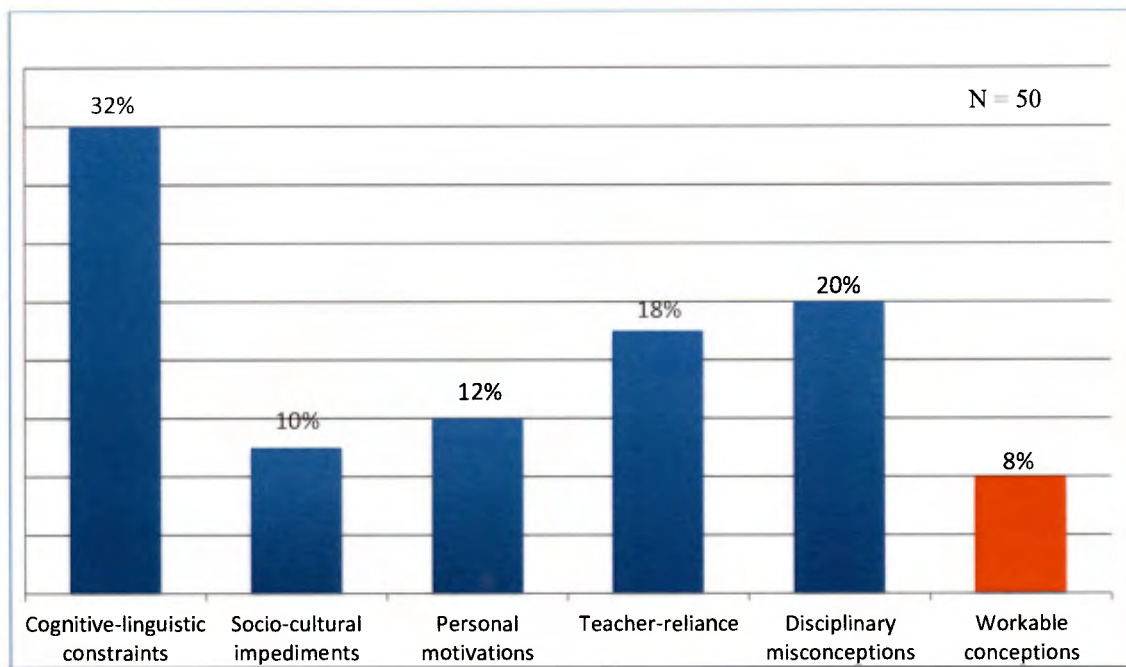
Out of the 43 teachers who responded in a non-affirmative manner, six teachers (6%) intimated that they had not developed any views about their students' ideas about accounts ('None in particular' – Daniel), while 34 respondents (37%) were unsure of their own views about students' understandings ('Don't know'). Three teachers (3%) chose to not answer the question. The reasons that may account for the sizeable

percentage of non-affirmative responses (46%) have to remain speculative. Nonetheless, it may be argued that such a significant percentage may be unsurprising given that, first, engaging with students' prior ideas or understandings has rarely been considered an instructional priority for many teachers in Singapore, and second, knowledge about the nature of accounts was by no means regarded as requisite knowledge that students needed to demonstrate for assessment purposes or expected to acquire as part of their history education in school. As such, question items that required teachers to reflect on their own views about students' pre-existing ideas, or to think about their students' understandings of accounts, may predictably result in some teachers going for the 'No' or 'Don't Know' options.

Nevertheless, for the 50 teachers who responded in an affirmative manner, there appeared a strong inclination for many of them (both among those who were teaching in the secondary schools and in the junior colleges) to view students' ideas largely in terms of the different *factors* that appeared to obstruct or had the effect of encumbering students' pre-existing understandings (most of which were perceived to be deficient in the first place). On the whole, the majority of respondents (92% or 46 teachers) indicated a predisposition to cite certain *constraining factors* and *inherent deficiencies* that hindered students' ability to understand the nature of accounts. In analyzing the questionnaire responses to explore the teachers' views regarding their students' ideas about accounts, six categories of teacher responses were identified (see Figure 6.2). These were: 'cognitive-linguistic constraints', 'socio-cultural impediments'; 'personal motivations'; 'teacher-reliance'; disciplinary misconceptions'; and 'workable conceptions' (as the only category of response that viewed students' ideas in favourable terms).



Figure 6.2: Distribution of teachers' survey responses regarding their views about students' ability to understand the nature and status of accounts (by percentage of respondents who affirmed views)



As shown in Figure 6.2, other than five teachers (8%) who gave affirmative statements about students' ability to understand accounts (**workable conceptions**), the rest of the respondents (92% or 45 teachers) were less sanguine in their comments. A common concern that emerged in the responses of the latter group of teachers was the apparent deficiencies that impeded, directly or in less direct ways, students' ability to understand accounts. In the **cognitive-linguistic constraints** category, for example, 32% of the respondents (16 teachers) cited students' constraints – both cognitive and linguistic – as fundamental factors that hindered their understandings of accounts. While a finer-grained distinction could be made between these two types of constraints (but which the existing data-set was not able to securely provide), most teachers' responses nonetheless appeared to suggest an 'associative link' between the two – where poor language skills and/or weak

cognitive ability may both be seen to affect or influence a student's grasp of disciplinary historical concepts.

Responses by six teachers, for instance, appeared to attribute students' deficient ideas to inherent cognitive constraints (such as their level of intellectual maturity), with students' literacy or linguistic limitations working to further impair their understanding of accounts. These teachers posited the view that students at both levels (13-14 years and 17-18 years of age) were not of the 'right age' to understand the nature of accounts. As Alicia, a secondary school teacher, explained, 'This idea of accounts and differing perspectives in history is a very big concept that comes from maturity & wide-reading - something students do not have or are exposed to at this age'. Another secondary school teacher, Lorraine, similarly felt that students at age 13-14 years had limited abilities to understand what they read, and believed that 'at their cognitive level, it is difficult for them to grasp abstract concepts in history'. Respondents who were teaching junior college (JC) students also noted difficulties in getting older students to understand accounts. As they insisted, 'At the age of 17-18, they are too young [...] to fully comprehend the nature and status of historical accounts' (Ahmad) and may not be able 'to detect biases and hidden agendas in accounts' (Mei San). In substantiating their positions, some of these teachers picked out a range of cognitive constraints and gave examples of a perceived lack of intellectual maturity (exacerbated by poor linguistic or literacy skills) when students displayed 'little empathy' towards issues in history (Suraya), or cited the fact that they passively and naively accepted all accounts as 'true facts' (Alex).

Responses from another group of ten teachers within this category, however, saw linguistic ineptitude as constraining students' cognitive ability, thereby restricting the kinds of ideas they held about accounts. These teachers cited a weak command of the English language and poor reading skills as key deficiencies that 'hindered students' comprehension of the text' (Azlan), and which consequentially 'affected their ability to understand the nature of accounts' (Shirin). Two teachers, while distinctly aware of the varying abilities students were likely to possess, saw the issue as one of *linguistic accessibility* where a severe linguistic deficiency among students of a certain 'academic stream' would necessarily lead to the students' inability to comprehend historical texts, and thereby negatively affect the ideas they have about accounts. As Prakash maintained,

Students' ability to understand historical accounts vary from (academic) stream to (academic) stream. Students in the weaker Normal (Academic) stream, due to their poor command of the English language, would certainly have a greater difficulty.

Another teacher similarly saw the ability to understand accounts as related to linguistic proficiency but emphasized that the issue went beyond a poor command of the English language. As Halimah explained,

The basic problem is reading skills. They cannot comprehend the complexity of phrasing, the ambiguity of meaning or of sophisticated arguments, if even the basics of being a good reader are not there. Without the basics, even discerning chronology or the significance of accounts or sources vis-à-vis each other, cannot be independently ascertained.

The notion that a poor command of language or weak literacy skills would result in poor ideas about history, or conversely, that superior linguistic proficiency would substantially improve students' cognition in history, also was shared by two JC teachers, who believed that language-proficient students had 'an edge over others' (Christopher) and would 'naturally perform well in the subject' (Sabrina).

Seen in the light of these responses, basic reading skills and a good grasp of the English language appeared to be crucial prerequisites in enabling students to have a better understanding of historical accounts. Based on the questionnaire data alone, sentiments about perceived linguistic deficiencies also appeared to be an important consideration for teachers when designing lesson activities or developing materials for teaching. There are two related observations about teachers' assumptions that emerged out of the reading of teachers' responses in this category: first, there exists the notion that language-related proficiencies would allow students to basically *understand the content* of historical accounts, and not so much to *acquire an understanding of* the nature and status of accounts in history. Almost invariably, teachers' responses seemed to indicate a predisposition to treat accounts (and an understanding of them) in substantive terms, rather than as involving second-order concepts. Implicit in the responses of some teachers also was the tendency to think *substantively* about the ideas students were expected to hold. This was seen especially in responses that indicated general tendencies to associate an understanding of accounts simply with issues of comprehension or with matters related to students' accessibility to knowledge (that was taught).

Only one teacher, Colin, appeared to recognize the conceptual difficulties in getting students to understand the nature of historical accounts. Colin agreed that linguistic competency may obstruct some of his students' ability to make sense of the accounts they read. Yet, he did not view the matter as simply a *comprehension* issue and was aware that 'any question that asks students to explain differences between accounts represents an even greater challenge for them'. He explained that this was because, 'beyond explaining differences in content', students would be expected 'to know that there is bias in all accounts' and that accounts 'must be seen in the contexts they were written'. These were challenging issues that his students may not be able to grapple with given that many of them were predisposed to approaching 'history texts at face value' – they would 'fumble' when they were 'not able to understand what was written', or if 'they could not find the answers' in the accounts. Colin believed that getting students to understand the nature of accounts was important as a means of teaching them history, but nevertheless, felt that issues related to students' linguistic competencies would have to be 'addressed first' before they can 'deal with other issues like differences between accounts'.

Second, by attributing students' academic capacities to linguistic incompetency or age-related cognitive inadequacy, teachers in this group also may have inadvertently placed limits on the kinds of ideas students could have about the nature of accounts. While proficiency in the language remains a major (and a practical) concern for many teachers, one outcome of such an assumption would be to presuppose that students with weak comprehension or language skills would consequently be conceptually weaker and thus unable to understand the basis upon which knowledge about history is created. Furthermore, a disparity may exist in terms what *is* possible

to achieve when discussing these notions; possibly, a firm grasp of accounts (or a sound understanding of other concepts in history) may *not* necessarily require a good grasp of linguistics or literacy skills. Informal unpublished British research cautioned against any moves in establishing such a connection. Extensive classroom-based videotaped research by the CHATA researchers (before their work on children's ideas about accounts), for example, highlighted the need to be cautious when making assumptions about a direct link between low-level linguistic competency with low-level intellectual competence (informal conversation with Lee, 2011). The informal evidence that emerged from their work suggested that some students with rather low levels of linguistic ability were nonetheless capable of demonstrating higher level conceptual understandings in their discussions about historical evidence.

While the assumption regarding the relationship between students' language proficiency with their ability to understand accounts (both in terms of their substantive and second-order understandings) has yet to be determined, such beliefs have found wide currency among secondary school teachers in Singapore. The next three categories (briefly discussed) further illustrated notions of constraints and deficiencies that teachers believed hindered students' ability to understand accounts. While they addressed different concerns, these categories placed emphasis on the influence of environmental or inter-personal factors that teachers in this study suggest may aggravate or mediate students' assumed deficiencies.

Responses of teachers placed in the **socio-cultural impediments** category (10% or five teachers), for example, made references to the impact of certain socio-cultural factors that hindered the development of a more pluralist view of accounts. One

respondent attributed the inability to develop more textured understandings to a 'cultural aversion' to 'challenge set textbook views' brought about by local students' 'social upbringing and mental conditioning' (Estelle). Another respondent similarly saw the drawbacks of a conditioned mental state which favoured 'conformity to an official narrative' when he asserted that students' 'exposure' only to 'a single, common factual account since primary school' has made them 'less receptive' and 'less willing' to consider the possibility of multiple accounts about the past (Alan). Some national and institutional constraints that are perceived to have hindered the development of students' ideas about history also have been addressed in Chapter 2.

Beyond cultural, however, other responses alluded to socio-economic factors such as the 'family background' which may have an effect on students' opportunity to 'have conversations' and 'to understand history in a much wider context' (Meng Ngee). According to responses from two teachers in this category, most students from the 'neighbourhood schools' were adjudged to have a lack of cultural and social capital that might have permitted them to understand notions of multiple accounts in history. One of these teachers (Su-lian) summed up the deficiency:

Being in a neighbourhood school, students come from middle-class families and most of them are not exposed to aspects of history. As such, students are unable to even understand the nature of historical accounts. The backgrounds of pupils play a part and my pupils do not really have the full capacity to understand these aspects of history.

While this group of respondents were fairly 'deterministic' in terms of their assumptions about the impact students' backgrounds had in aggravating their apparent conceptual deficiencies, teachers in the **personal motivation** category

(12% or six teachers) viewed these constraints as essentially intrinsic to students' flawed attitudes towards the subject. The responses by these teachers indicated a belief that students' 'attitude towards the subject' was 'critical', and that 'personal motivation' (or the lack of it) was a primary obstacle for students' ability to understand aspects of the discipline (Farah). Responses by two teachers in this category suggested the possibility of a direct link between students' 'attitude' and their ability to understand accounts, with one teacher intimating that her many 'years of experience' have shown her that 'only the hardworking pupils can show genuine keenness and the ability to understand historical accounts' (Genevieve). The generally implied belief amongst teachers in this category was that students who lacked 'prior interest' and the necessary 'motivation' would fail to appreciate the worth of the discipline, much less have any understandings about the nature of accounts.

For a few teachers, however, such failings on the part of the students could possibly be rectified if there was active guidance by the teacher. Responses by nine teachers in the **teacher-reliance** category (18%) suggest that the kinds of workable ideas students have about accounts and the ways in which these understandings were acquired rested, and were reliant, on the support given by the teacher. Two respondents, for example, were specific about the *personal* nature of the guidance teachers should give, which may include engaging in 'a storytelling approach that relates to the teacher's personal experiences' (Faizal) or demonstrating to students the teacher's own 'personality and passion for the subject' (Hetty). Four respondents, however, pointed to the importance of the teacher's active intervention in daily classroom instruction especially in clarifying



students' imperfect knowledge about the content of history, while three others were more predisposed to an essentially 'teacher-directed' approach of *correcting* students' misunderstandings about accounts and aspects of the discipline. On balance, the respondents in this category were convinced that the development of students' understanding of accounts was dependent upon the teachers' active intercession and was necessarily improved by the requisite guidance given by teachers. Nevertheless, as in previous categories, the nature of teachers' suggested corrective strategies appeared to be conceived in substantive terms rather than designed to address conceptual difficulties that were related to disciplinary ideas about accounts.

The final two categories of responses differed slightly in terms of how two groups of respondents viewed students' conceptions about accounts; one appeared to view students' understandings in deficient terms as they were largely perceived as consisting of **disciplinary misconceptions** (20% or ten teachers), while the other saw students' ideas as **workable conceptions** (8% or four teachers) and recognized that these prior ideas may (already) be useful in developing further understandings. Nonetheless, both categories were clear departures from previous responses as they demonstrated a disposition on the part of the respondents to think about students' understandings on two levels: first, in terms of the kinds of *ideas* students seemed to hold about accounts rather than the *factors* that impeded or constrained their acquisition of such understandings; and second, in thinking about students' conceptions (or misconceptions) about accounts in *disciplinary* rather than *substantive* terms. While the responses may not provide a fine-grained picture of the range of assumptions teachers may have about students' understandings, they

nonetheless dealt explicitly with aspects of students' preconceptions, and provided preliminary indications as to the kinds of ideas teachers believe may obstruct or assist students' understandings of accounts.

Responses provided by the ten teachers in the **disciplinary misconceptions** category pointed to a belief among teachers that students' flawed conceptions about the nature of historical knowledge had directly contributed to their imperfect understanding of accounts. One such misconception that was often mentioned was the idea that history can provide a true and accurate story about the past. Five of the respondents stressed that such a view of history was 'one-dimensional' (Natalyn) and 'simplistic' (Jaswant) and have led many students to believe that 'there can only be one true version of history' (Syafiqah). This 'faulty thinking' about the nature of historical knowledge, as one teacher explained, had resulted in students construing 'all accounts as true and absolute' with many of them accepting 'the "truths" in textbooks without question' (Jaswant). Other teachers also pointed to another simplistic idea about the nature of historical knowledge that many students seemed to be working with: the notion that 'primary evidence has to be more useful than secondary' (Mark). Mark believed that such a misconception would naturally prejudice students if they were asked to decide between a primary source and a historian's account, believing that they would reject all secondary accounts as 'only primary documents could be trusted to tell the truth'. Other teachers shared Mark's sentiments but felt that students would accept a historian's account as 'valid' only 'if it comes from a person of authority' (Hisham).

The responses in this category demonstrated (implicitly at times) both teachers' views about students' ideas and their assumptions about the disciplinary misconceptions that constrained students' understanding of accounts. For instance, teachers who were troubled by the idea that students were operating with the misconception that accounts were 'absolute truths' or reproductions of a fixed reality, were doubtful of students' capacity to see historical accounts as 'constructs' (Jennifer) or as historians' re-constructions of the past. Similarly, students who failed to see history as being more than a 'single factual account of the past' (Natalyn) were more likely to reject all other competing or differing accounts as being 'wrong' or as 'lying', rather than to evaluate each account based on its own merit and claim to historical credibility. In both instances, by mistakenly 'thinking of history as static' (Syafiqah), students were adjudged to have failed to 'realize that accounts are often interpretations, determined to some extent by their authors' bias, purpose, culture, and politics' (Albert). Nevertheless, while teachers' responses appeared to recognize that some of these preconceptions were mistaken or 'problematic' there was little indication on their part to try and understand how these ideas may work to hinder students' understandings.

Finally, the responses of four teachers in the **Workable Conceptions** category (8%) provided important counter-points to the perception that teachers in Singapore have not thought about their students' ideas in constructive ways. All four respondents, for example, noted that students were able to recognize the existence of multiple accounts, and would be able to explain their apparent differences in terms of the respective views held by their authors. Magdalene, for example, maintained that at 13-14 years of age, students would already have understood that a historical event

‘could be viewed from many perspectives’ and that the perspectives in historical accounts ‘differed based on personal beliefs, backgrounds and motives’ of their authors. Another teacher, Amanda, also recognized that her students were ‘aware that accounts carried their authors’ viewpoints’ and that these viewpoints ‘shaped the way historians write their accounts’.

A related preconception (on author perspective) that one teacher believed students held was the notion of ‘bias’ in accounts. Hatta, a JC teacher, believed that some of his students were aware that ‘historical accounts reflect a range of biases of their authors’ but felt that almost typically bias was viewed by students in a negative way. He clarified,

Many of my students come into class with a very cynical outlook. Some have the mindset that accounts in textbooks are all propaganda, others believe that historians write history stories only for their own benefit. But there are also a few who are aware that accounts are based on people’s perspectives and do change depending on the author’s intentions or the evidence found. These students are the ones who would be able to show that a ‘biased’ account is not always an unreliable one.

Teachers like Hatta appeared aware that students have different conceptions of ‘bias’ that required changing or developing and that these preconceptions could potentially be used to improve students’ understandings. He and another teacher, Chandra, believed that this would not be difficult to do. As Chandra explained,

Students know the differences between different epochs and how these differences can affect the way a society behaves or how a person thinks. Students need to be shown that the period of history and the

attitudes at the time reflect the way an account was written. It would be the same with the author's bias – it is both a reflection of his own beliefs and perspective as well as the values of the time.

The responses of teachers in this category demonstrated awareness that students' ideas need not necessarily be 'simplistic' or 'one-dimensional' all of the time. Their responses seemed to indicate that not all students would automatically read accounts at face value; in fact, it was likely that some students would have a deliberative process in place if asked to consider the claims put forward in any account of history. Chandra, for example, maintained that 'students have developed the ability of not accepting opinions and interpretations at face value. They would most likely consider different perspectives before coming to any conclusion'. Although the ways in which such an 'ability' was acquired may not have been openly suggested, two of the teachers spoke of the importance of evidence, and how students were explicitly taught 'to know that they needed to use evidence to support their views and opinions' (Magdalene).

*Discussion: Conceptions that constrain and ideas that build understandings*

As described in the previous sub-section, the first four categories of teacher responses were more likely to highlight notions of students' deficits or constraints rather than 'uncovering' teachers' assumptions and tacit beliefs about the *kinds of ideas* students were likely to have about accounts. Admittedly, this may have been a weakness on the part of the questioning strategy, which resulted in many teachers being more predisposed (and more comfortable even) to provide responses that *explained* students' *inability to understand* accounts, rather than

responses that incorporated tentative remarks about, or offered specific examples of, students' ideas about accounts. Nevertheless, a key assumption that appeared pervasive in the teachers' responses was the inherent cognitive or linguistic deficiencies that had, in one way or another, impaired many students' ability to comprehend the nature of accounts. Another key idea was the importance of a teacher's close guidance and active intervention during the learning process, as a crucial means to rectify such deficiencies.

Among respondents who highlighted the importance of a teacher's guidance, most appeared to hold assumptions about students' deficient and flawed starting points, many of which were used to validate their beliefs about the decisive nature of teacher guidance in rectifying students' understandings. For example, many of these teachers worked on the premise that, on their own, students would 'find it difficult to make sense of accounts' (Hwee Goh), and would not be 'able to connect events of the past to the present' (Kumar). Generally, they believed that students may not likely see the 'inter-relatedness of events in history' (Isa) or be able to 'see the big picture if you don't show them how' (Jamie). Hence, 'unless guided by the teacher...historical accounts may just appear to students as simply a series of unrelated events about the past' (Reuben). What was striking in the responses of many of these teachers however, was the sense that their 'diagnosis' of students' difficulties appeared to be made in terms of substantive deficits (as discussed on p.219). Responses indicated that these teachers were themselves thinking in largely substantive terms in response to expected understandings that were disciplinary in nature.

Consequently, it may be unsurprising then that the ‘guidance’ that was frequently spoken of to *correct* students’ apparently deficient conceptions seemed to suggest an approach that was designed to address (mainly) students’ substantive misunderstandings. Usually, this took the form of teacher-initiated strategies that were designed to put right deficient conceptions by providing students with ‘proper explanation and clarification’ (Annabelle). Now, this is *not* to say that these teachers were wrong to think that students’ ideas could be a problem, or that the teachers’ capacity and expertise to put them right is in doubt. The issues, instead, are that: first, teachers are not familiar with thinking in terms of disciplinary misconceptions (about accounts) and the means to address them, and second, they seemed to be unaware of the possibility of regarding students’ prior ideas as being *useful* starting points to remove possible misconceptions and build further understandings (see *How People Learn*, Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999).

Crucially, an approach that views students’ understanding of accounts as essentially a matter of deficient substantive knowledge or as an instance of content comprehension failure brought about by linguistic deficits, would only serve to demonstrate students’ difficulties in understanding the accounts that they read, and not so much students’ understanding of the *nature* of accounts in history. Unless teachers are able to get some of these prior conceptions right, they are not likely to be able to do anything effective to correct students’ disciplinary misconceptions. Simply telling students that ‘this is wrong’ or telling them what is ‘right’ may not be sufficient; these would simply amount to ‘correcting wrong ideas’ (construed as ‘wrong substantive information’) and would do little in

developing historical *understandings*. Moreover, a teaching approach that places little confidence in the student's ability to make sense of historical knowledge, and focuses on the regulatory transfer of 'correct' information that is closely guided by the teacher, is likely to constrain any kind of teaching that purports to build improved understandings about the nature of history (and to that extent, what sense students can make of the *content*).

Responses by teachers in the last two categories have begun to consider students' ideas in 'conceptions' terms. Teachers who saw students' pre-existing ideas simply as disciplinary misconceptions were likely to view these ideas in deficit terms. Yet, while the assumption that emerged remained one of flawed or faulty disciplinary understandings, their responses also suggested an awareness of the kinds of prior ideas that students were assumed to work with, albeit ones that were impeding the latter's ability to grasp proper understandings about accounts (and aspects of the historical discipline). Seen from a positive angle, this emerging awareness could be an important initial step for teachers to spend time understanding students' ideas better, as well as having them think about ways to rectify or modify students' misconceptions. As shown by teachers who viewed these ideas as workable conceptions, students' notions of perspectives, points of view and personal bias appeared 'useful already' in enabling students to acquire some initial understandings about the nature of accounts. Treating the preconceptions students hold about history and historical accounts as their 'starting points', these teachers seemed aware (even if tacitly) that these prior ideas could potentially be used to develop students' disciplinary understandings, or be counted as important knowledge to develop possible 'corrective strategies'.



This awareness also would presumably enable teachers to identify the *simple* ideas students are working with, and subsequently allow them to plan an instruction that is geared towards developing more *complex* understandings about accounts. Nonetheless, for teachers to capitalize on the opportunity to move students' baseline ideas towards more advanced understandings, there may be a need for them to be familiar not only with the range of ideas their students are assumed to be working with (from *simple* to *complex*), but also be aware of their own expectations as to what constituted *simple* or *complex* ideas about accounts.

### *6.3.2 Teachers' assumptions about students' ideas about accounts: Distinguishing the Simple from the Complex*

Responses to a question item that asked the 50 teachers (who affirmed that students held preconceptions about accounts) for the likely *range* of these ideas (see Question 11) demonstrated a majority (68% or 34 teachers) who viewed students' pre-existing ideas as being limited to the 'simple' levels, where ideas required to be changed (14 teachers) or be developed (20 teachers). The rest of the respondents (32% or 12 teachers) viewed these students' ideas as being in the 'complex' levels, where ideas were regarded as useful already (seven teachers) or quite sophisticated (five teachers).

The ideas teachers deemed 'simple' ranged from thinking about accounts in terms of 'absolutes' where students believed that only one account must necessarily be accurate ('one is telling the truth and the other one is lying' – Robert, a secondary school teacher), to a rather simple 'relativist' position, that on the one hand showed students having the idea that *all* accounts should be accepted as equally

valid (as ‘different people see things from different sides’ – Nilam, a JC teacher), and on the other, demonstrated ideas that rejected the possibility of *any* account being truthful or accurate (as ‘the stories people write can be some kind of propaganda and so we can’t really be sure if they are true’ – Lydia, a secondary school teacher). These teachers may not be far off the mark in their views as to what many students in the study seemed to think about accounts even if these were limited mainly to the less sophisticated ideas (see discussion of students’ ideas in Chapter 5).

The ideas teachers regarded as belonging to a ‘complex’ level ranged from students thinking that different accounts were multiple versions of events in history with each one ‘anchored’ to its respective authorial references (since ‘accounts are different due to the different backgrounds and the biases of their authors’ – Natasha, a secondary school teacher), to a more dynamic conception of accounts that was ‘context-bound’ and that shifted with perspectival orientation or evidential focus (Hatta, a JC teacher). Given the varied ideas that many of their students held about accounts, however, it was more likely that the teachers’ descriptions were indicative of students who displayed the higher range of these ideas, even if some of these ideas appeared as insufficient understandings. Nonetheless, the positive affirmation of the ‘complex’ ideas suggested awareness on the part of some teachers of certain useful ideas students held, or should move towards, as teachers managed students’ understandings about accounts.

Generally, however, teachers’ responses in categorizing students’ ideas (in terms set by the research instruments and based on the researcher’s expedient ‘Simple’

or 'Complex' dichotomy) may be seen to suggest three broad ways of looking at students' conceptions of accounts, namely, i) **static and binary**; ii) **subjective and perspectival**; and iii) **dynamic and multi-dimensional**.

*i) A static and binary conception of accounts*

In this category, the teachers' responses suggested that students holding a static and binary conception were likely to demonstrate a conviction in a fixed notion of historical knowledge, and one that was mediated by a default belief in the existence of a correct version of past events 'out there'. As historical accounts were viewed as factual depictions of past events as they 'actually happened', students were perceived to operate with the notion that there is a singular, true account of that past. Given that belief, students were predisposed to thinking about accounts in a binary fashion: accounts as right or wrong, true or false, accurate or mistaken, and so on, with little recognition that a range of views might be held. For instance, a frequent assumption that emerged (among teachers) when describing ideas that required changing or developing was the perceived tendency among students to believe that only 'institutionalized narratives' (Ailee) would offer the most accurate and reliable account of a particular historical event. Teachers who mentioned this idea found that students were disinclined to entertain a range of views about a particular event or to recognize the multi-faceted nature of historical writing. Instead, they would prefer to gravitate towards an authoritative (or even 'authorized') interpretation that was fuss-free and devoid of conflict.

Overall, teachers' responses in this category appeared to suggest a rather uncomplicated view of students' misconceptions and the role of teaching: Students'

static and binary ideas about accounts were adjudged to be in need of ‘correction’, and as such (at least for some teachers), teaching was simply a matter of *correcting* the incorrect views students hold by exposing them to alternative accounts of events. What is important to distinguish here, however, is that such moves were unlikely to be designed to correct the *ideas* students have about the *nature* of accounts, but more at putting right students’ knowledge of the *substantive* account so that it matched the version that the teacher believed should be accepted (or which the teacher deemed students needed).

*ii) A subjective and perspectiveful conception of accounts*

In this response category, teachers assumed that students had a *subjective and perspectiveful* conception of accounts. The teachers’ responses appeared to acknowledge that students do think about accounts in different ways, but these varied ways were typically characterized by the latter’s tendency to base their thinking on the subjective influences that may have shaped each author’s account of events. Specifically, students were perceived to be amenable to the notion of multiple versions of a fixed past, with each one carrying the ‘perspectives’ of its author. The term ‘perspectiveful’ (Barca, 1997) here is used to indicate the teachers’ assumption that students saw accounts as constituted in large part by the authors’ subjective ideas, personal opinions, private beliefs, and distinct points of view. Figuring out the nature of accounts, including the ways an account could be judged and arbitrated, would very much depend on an evaluation of its authorial references, including the ‘perspective’ that was assumed to be embedded in that account. Such authorship-based views may be demonstrated in students’ perceived beliefs about the level of subjectivity intrinsic within accounts which ‘reflected the range of biases of

their authors' (Colin), their notions of accounts as constituted by the authors' undisclosed intentions or political objectives (Robert), or their ideas about accounts as embodiments of the authors' individual 'perspectives' (Chelsey).

For some teachers, these ideas were 'useful already' as they themselves may hold the view that accounts are indeed subjective constructions, and that authorship issues are essentially at the heart of historical contestations. By implication, teaching history meant helping students to see the range of perspectives and biases authors of accounts might have (including historians), as a way of explaining why people see the past differently, and why there are multiple or differing versions of the past. Some teachers, however, saw certain limitations in such an approach. Merely focusing on a study of the authors (such as their biases, backgrounds, positions, opinions, etc.) as the main strategy in evaluating accounts may lead students to develop simplistic evaluative procedures, such that an account is deemed 'reliable simply because the author/provenance is credible' (Hannah), or that an account must be biased or untrustworthy simply because the author is of a specific nationality or interest group (Russell). Yet, data in this study suggests the possibility that these ideas about subjectivity and author perspectives may be instrumental in helping students develop more dynamic ways of looking at the nature of accounts.

### *iii) A dynamic and multi-dimensional conception of accounts*

In this response category, teachers assumed that students have a *dynamic and multi-dimensional* conception of accounts. Through their descriptions of students' ideas, teachers appeared to acknowledge that students had the capacity to think about accounts in more sophisticated ways (as part of viewing history as a complex

discipline). For example, some teachers were aware that when dealing with differing accounts, students not only would think about authorship issues such as personal viewpoints or inescapable perspectives, but also were conscious of the need to consider other aspects, such as those related to ‘audience’ and the ‘contexts’ within which the account was written. This was reflected, for instance, in one teacher’s response where students were seen to operate with the idea that accounts held ‘different views due to the personal beliefs/agendas/motives of the author’ but that they also ‘differed based on the intended audience and the context of the period of history they were written in’ (Jolene).

In assuming that students were working with a view of accounts that was conditional and contingent upon other extraneous factors beyond simply the viewpoints or ‘private intentions of the authors’ (Milton), responses in this category pointed to an awareness of students’ dynamic conceptions that was essentially characterized by a multi-factorial or multi-dimensional approach to thinking about accounts. One way of recognizing this dynamism in students’ views may be seen in the shifts students were likely to make as they thought about the different factors or aspects that might impinge upon the status of accounts, such as ‘accounts are different because they are also dependent on what the historian wants to find out’ (Nathan), or that changes in accounts may be due to ‘changes in authors’ perspectives depending on the evidence found’ (Hatta). Another way may also be to consider students’ deliberative tendencies as they attempt to explain multiple accounts – such as ‘accounts are different due to the concept of space and time’ as they were ‘written in different epochs’ and meant to address ‘particular issues’ or to ‘shape the social, political and economic behaviour of the people or society at that time’ (Chandra).

Such assumed moves on the part of students appeared to suggest the use of certain implied sets of criteria across several factors when adjudicating or arbitrating between accounts. They highlighted the notion of students' ideas as being dynamic or flexible, and pointed to the possibility that these ideas could be changed or be developed under teaching. In this sense, teaching can influence not only what students need to know (in terms of substantive knowledge) but also the development of students' disciplinary ideas about history. The proposition for a more effective historical instruction here would involve teachers capitalizing on this dynamic notion of students' ideas to devise ways to help students generate sets of criteria as part of an approach to understand, for instance, why 'accounts are by their very nature different' (Lee & Ashby, 2000). This may involve positioning history as a public form of knowledge and familiarizing students with specific disciplinary lenses that could be used to develop deeper understandings about accounts, and other related aspects such as about authors and their perspectives, the influence of historical contexts, the centrality of evidence in making historical claims, and so on.

*Discussion: Ways of looking at students' ideas about accounts and speculative moves*

Categorizing expectations about students' 'Simple' to 'Complex' ideas in terms of the three broad categories discussed above revealed the different ways in which teachers have thought about their students' conceptions of accounts. Such categorizations also provided opportunities for some speculative statements regarding the moves teachers might make to address or develop those ideas or conceptions. For example, teachers who assumed that students were operating with

*static and binary* conceptions of accounts may pursue a largely knowledge-based approach by providing students with other ‘objective’ or generally ‘accepted’ versions as a means to counter-balance unitary beliefs about accounts of events in the past. Such approach, however, may not be as effective since: first, it does not entail teachers recognizing that these ‘wrong’ ideas are beyond substantive in nature and that they involve second-order understandings of history; second, it fails to ‘layer’ the new knowledge (Chandra’s term) with relevant understandings about the constructed nature of accounts (as justifiably different, for example); and third, it does not appear to recognize the dynamic ideas students are capable of operating with, or are able to acquire through an explicit teaching strategy. Consequently, such an approach may not do enough to address students’ prior ideas, and would likely end up as missed opportunities in using these preconceptions to develop further understandings (as suggested by the first key principle of *How People Learn*).

It seems reasonable to suppose that teachers who assumed that students had *subjective and perspectival* conceptions of accounts would be likely to engage in a systematic questioning of authorship-based issues to sift through matters of biases, backgrounds, training or personal opinions and viewpoints. ‘Know the author’ appeared to be one of the oft-quoted injunctions which teachers in the study often suggested as starting points for their students when questioning different accounts. While this is, by all means, a necessary step in understanding why accounts are different, in privileging the importance of cross-examining authorial references over other criterial means of evaluating accounts, these teachers also ran the risk of limiting their students’ evaluative procedures to simply author-related matters (such as differences due to opinions or personal points of view). Furthermore, an approach



to history that regards such conceptions as ‘useful already’ may, invariably, persuade students into accepting the notion of multiple accounts as a matter of different viewpoints or opinions, with historical knowledge (possibly) conceived as contingent, idiosyncratic and subjective.

Teachers who assumed that students hold *dynamic and multi-dimensional* conceptions, however, would recognize that students had the capacity to think about accounts in provisional terms. This is because unlike those who assumed that students only held static and binary conceptions, these teachers were confident that students’ dynamic conceptions would enable them to recognize the multifaceted nature of historical writing. These understandings would consequently allow students to utilize evaluative procedures that focused on criteria beyond author bias or differences in opinions. As the data suggests, some teachers appeared aware of the range of ideas students held, with some possibly working with more sophisticated ideas about accounts compared to their peers. This recognition suggests the possibility that these teachers may already have considered ways to move students’ ideas towards better understandings about the *nature* of accounts.

### *6.3.3 Mapping teacher assumptions: a framework for thinking about teachers’ ideas about student understanding of accounts*

Based on these observations, as well as the preceding discussions on teachers’ thinking (in this Chapter), a framework for thinking about teachers’ assumptions about students’ understandings of accounts was constructed. Figure 6.3 below demonstrates the five classifications of teachers’ ideas across an *Unreflective* to

*Reflective* range, with the first classification the only one designated as ‘unreflective’ owing to the absence of any preliminary thoughts about students’ prior ideas or understandings – expressed or interpreted – based on the teachers’ responses in the survey. The subsequent four classifications reflected a developing reflexivity as teachers’ ideas were described in terms of degrees of *cumulative awareness* they hold about students’ understandings of accounts.

An important note to highlight in classifying teachers’ ideas in such a way was the difficulty involved in ascribing or categorizing teachers’ responses to a specific response category as, often, individual teacher’s ideas and assumptions about students’ understandings appeared to be fluid and were not as clear-cut as the classifications depicted in Figure 6.3. What may be categorized, however, were teacher *performances* as manifested in their interpreted responses to the survey question/s. As the awareness developed higher up the response category, teachers’ thinking about students’ understandings may be seen to move from emergent to fully aware.

Figure 6.3: From survey response: A framework for thinking about teachers’ ideas about students’ understandings of accounts

Cat	Teachers’ ideas about students’ understandings as...	Descriptor
1.	<b>Unreflective: Students have No Understandings of Accounts</b>	<b>Teachers are unreflective; they have no idea about student understandings of accounts.</b> Teachers in this category appeared to have not thought much about students’ understandings about the nature of accounts. They saw no relevance in knowing about students’ understandings, and did not see how knowledge about students’ ideas would impact learning and instruction.
2.	<b>Reflective: Students have Limited Understandings of Accounts</b>	<b>Teachers consider that students have limited or no understandings of accounts.</b> Teachers in this category appeared to show some degree of awareness about students’ ideas but this is restricted to students having limited or

		no understanding about the nature of accounts. Teachers were likely to think in substantive terms and believed that students only superficially accept what is read. Younger students were perceived as not having the capability to possess or display any high-level understandings.
3.	<b>Reflective: Students have Unitary Understandings of Accounts</b>	<p><b>Teachers consider students' understandings of accounts as unitary and simplistic.</b></p> <p>Teachers in this category appeared to demonstrate an emergent awareness of students having prior ideas and existing understandings about the nature of accounts. Nonetheless, this awareness about student understandings (though useable) is conceptualized in typically 'deficit' and largely substantive terms. Teachers in this category assumed that students hold simplistic or unitary ideas about accounts, such as that there can only be one true account of history, amongst other wrong versions.</p>
4.	<b>Reflective: Students have Subjectivist Understandings of Accounts</b>	<p><b>Teachers consider students as having subjectivist views about accounts.</b></p> <p>Teachers in this category appeared to demonstrate an awareness of subjectivity in terms of how students viewed accounts. Teachers accepted that some students may hold deficit ideas about accounts, but also recognized that other students have diverse ideas across a range of subjectivist understandings about how accounts are created. As stories that were written by different people to reflect different ideas and beliefs, all accounts are 'perspectiveful' interpretations that should be accepted.</p>
5.	<b>Reflective: Students have Sophisticated Notions about Accounts</b>	<p><b>Teachers consider students as having quite sophisticated understandings about accounts</b></p> <p>Teachers in this category viewed accounts in disciplinary terms and demonstrated awareness of students' understandings identified in all preceding categories. Teachers were fully aware of <i>a range of prior ideas</i> about accounts that students bring into the classroom (from simplistic, one-dimensional ideas about correct/wrong accounts, to multiple/subjectivist understandings, to the recognition that some can students use criteria to make sense of differences between accounts).</p>

The classifications and categories described in Figure 6.3, however, are not mutually exclusive nor can they, on their own, fully portray the thinking of individual teachers. After all, the nature of teacher thinking is admittedly complex, with frames of reference for thinking about students' competencies, ideas and understandings shifting from one group of students to the next. Instead, higher levels may be thought of as subsuming the categories or ideas described in preceding levels, suggesting that a teacher may be characterized as being 'fully aware' of students' preconceptions

(Category 5) if his or her responses indicated a recognition of the range of ideas students may have about accounts across all classifications.

An important distinction worth highlighting is the notion that teachers in the first three categories were more likely to be concerned with substantive matters or the need to ‘correct’ students’ deficient (substantive) understandings. Teachers in the fourth and fifth categories, on the other hand, may be assumed to demonstrate an implicit recognition of second order ideas in history, and the awareness of the range of second-order understandings students may hold about accounts, both deficient and workable. Despite the limitations, the proposed framework offers the possibility of thinking about teachers’ ideas in terms of ‘patterns of teacher assumptions’ about their students’ ideas and understandings of historical accounts. Relevant to this investigation is the opportunity offered by the classification of these patterns of teacher assumptions to situate the exploration of selected teachers’ interview responses within the framework built through the analysis of the survey data.

#### **6.4 Analyzing the interview data to demonstrate complexity of teachers’ ideas**

As mentioned, a key concern that emerged when analyzing data based on open-ended questionnaire responses of 93 history teachers across two academic levels (84 secondary two and nine junior college teachers) was the difficulty in illustrating more complex aspects of teachers’ beliefs and assumptions. This may include the consistency of teachers’ ideas when responding to ‘open’ questions (through a questionnaire) as opposed to their responses ‘when pressed’ (in an interview setting), detecting possible nuances in terms of their responses about the kind of ideas

students would need as part of learning school history, and the extent to which any of these teachers had already thought of strategies that could help modify or ‘correct’ what they conceived as deficit student understandings about accounts. As part of the research design, the depth interviews conducted with nine teachers (see the Methodological discussion in Chapter 3) aimed to address some of these issues, while the questionnaire data offered grounds for thinking that similar ideas found in the interviews were not untypical of teachers’ assumptions.

The rich data obtained through the interviews, however, covered many interesting aspects about teacher beliefs and expectations that cannot be fully explored in the space available here. Hence, the brief commentary that accompanies the discussion of each teacher’s ideas in the following section typically encompasses the following; a) the teacher’s ideas and beliefs about school history and student learning; b) the teacher’s views about their students’ existing understandings of accounts, and whether these prior understandings were seen in ‘useful’ or ‘deficit’ terms; and c) the teacher’s beliefs regarding the kinds of ideas students would need to understand accounts, and whether they had strategies in place to help develop student understandings. Thereafter, the framework for thinking about teachers’ ideas (in Figure 6.3) was used as a reference point when discussing the teachers’ assumptions and orientations about student understandings. Again, *pseudonyms* were given to all teachers discussed below.

**Teacher A: Ms. Elizabeth Tan, female Chinese, in her early 20s (S39)**

**Elizabeth** had been in the service for only 11 months when she participated in this study. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and was trained to teach history and

geography at the secondary school level. At the time of the interview, she was teaching both these subjects at a mission school for girls. Generally, Elizabeth believed that while historical knowledge is 'factual and supposedly absolute' only perspectives of historians differed. School history offered students an opportunity to view the historical past from multiple perspectives and to 'understand that there's no one absolute way of looking at an issue in history'. Elizabeth believed that students come into the history classroom with negative ideas about history as a subject and saw those ideas as 'discouraging' both for the teacher as well as for the aims of history learning in schools. Many students, she felt, worked with the misconception that 'textbooks and history guidebooks' were 'the authority on the topics students are taught in the classroom'. As such, she saw students' ideas about accounts in 'deficit' terms as they were not likely to understand that historical accounts were written by 'dynamic individuals' who had 'their own thinking' and who were 'influenced by the socio-economic conditions of the time'. Consequently, students would fail to understand that historians would give 'different perspectives and points of view to the same event in history'. In order to develop students' understandings of accounts, teachers would need to 'expose students to the different perspectives' in history and to teach them to adopt an 'astute and analytical mindset' when critically questioning each perspective. On the students' part, Elizabeth believed that they needed to be receptive to different views and learn to recognize that 'sometimes, there's no absolute answer, as all perspectives are valid'.

**Teacher B: Ms. Susan Lim, female Chinese, in her mid-20s (S81)**

Susan had been a teacher for nearly two years when she participated in the study. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and at the time of the interview, was teaching

history and English language at a neighbourhood secondary school. Susan believed that school history is a subject that 'creates opportunities to learn from mistakes made in the past in order to strive towards a better society'. Similar to Elizabeth, Susan felt that students worked with negative ideas about history that were mostly 'counter-productive'. She believed that students come into the classroom 'thinking that the past is already dead and gone, thus it does not play any significant role in modern day context'. She found herself having to 'do a lot of work' and 'had to be really creative to design lessons that would capture their attention'. She also believed that her students were likely to think about history in 'very rigid terms', and held the misconception that 'only factual and one-sided viewpoints are the truth'. Due to their 'lack of exposure to history at home', she felt that most of her students 'did not have the capacity to grasp the difficult concepts in history' and were 'unable to even understand the nature of accounts in history'. Even if they did, Susan believed that these students tended to have 'very simplistic ideas' as 'their understanding is very much textbook-based'. She found that 'when differing variations appear, students needed to be convinced and to accept that history is subjective as well.' As part of their understandings about accounts, Susan believed that students needed to understand that 'historians are human beings' and as such 'their accounts are subjective' and were 'based on their personal opinions, which may be biased'. In order for students' understandings to develop, Susan's strategy was 'simply' to 'explain to students that historical accounts are mainly made up of personal accounts of people and thus they tend to differ based on circumstances or experience. However, there are truths in every account so we have to accept all of them and not take one particular account as the only truth'.

**Teacher C: Mr. Chandra Das, male Indian, in his late 20s (S4)**

**Chandra** had been in the teaching service for only one-and-a-half years when he participated in the study. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and was teaching history in an International Baccalaureate programme run by the Humanities department in one of the premier independent schools in Singapore. Chandra was an Army officer prior to joining teaching and hence, it was not surprising that he saw history as ‘an essential component of national education’, and highlighted the subject’s ‘function’ as ‘a platform for ethical deliberation’ and ‘a resource for strengthening national identity and good citizenship’. He also believed that learning history had ‘armed students with life-long critical thinking skills’ that were ‘fundamental for survival in society’. Yet, Chandra was convinced that some of his students come into the classroom with a mindset that ‘accounts of history are some kind of national propaganda’ (unsurprising perhaps in view of what Chandra thinks history should be doing) and that ‘all accounts must therefore be biased’. He felt that such ‘a biased mindset’ needed to be changed as it would make it ‘difficult for students to understand the motivations and reality behind events and issues’. Nonetheless, Chandra believed that many of his students had ideas about accounts that were quite sophisticated. As his students had been ‘trained constantly to take in different perspectives and to view materials objectively’, many of them had developed ‘the ability to not accept opinions and interpretations at face value’. He was confident that his students would exercise ‘a healthy dose of scepticism’ when dealing with a historical account, and demonstrate ‘good historical enquiry’ by ‘doing more research and reading other accounts’ before ‘coming up with a conclusion’.



**Teacher D: Mr. Salim Moin, male Malay, in his late 20s (S84)**

**Salim** had spent three years teaching lower secondary history (local history, mainly) at Singapore's top Independent school for boys when he was interviewed for this study. He had completed a four-year Bachelor of Arts with Honours degree programme at a local university where he majored in history. Salim believed that the learning of history in schools offered students an opportunity to 'discover about their own humanity' on top of imbuing in them 'a sense of belonging and some cultural heritage'. He surmised that the marginalization of history in the curriculum was partly because students themselves had 'a set of values and an inherent bias towards history'. Hence, 'overcoming stereotypes' appeared to be a predominant focus for his teaching as most of his students, he assumed, came into the classroom with set views about history as 'political propaganda', especially where the national history was concerned. Salim believed that students needed to be taught to view accounts 'more rationally and objectively'. His preferred strategy in the classroom had been to provide opportunities for students to examine 'primary sources' as an 'authentic means' to 'uncover differences in historians' perspectives'. At a basic level, Salim wanted students to understand that 'perceptions differ' and that 'every single account is reflective of its author's personal bias and opinions'. Having such ideas could temper students' pre-existing cynicisms when reading history, which could then be developed further by highlighting to them the importance of having a 'perspective in history'. This can be done by 'showing them that there are multiple perspectives and that even their own perspective is inherently biased.'

**Teacher E: Mr. Chris Chan, male Chinese, in his mid-30s (S29)**

Chris had eight years of experience teaching students from three neighbourhood schools when he participated in this study. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and had been teaching history and English language since he was first deployed to teach in a secondary school. He was contemplative in his approach to school history and saw the subject as a means for students to ‘discover a whole new world of information and facts’ that offered them the opportunity to ‘understand, think and contemplate’. While aware that history ‘trains one to think and consider different perspectives’, however, he was convinced that the concepts and content in secondary history were ‘too much for students at such a young age to digest’, and only ‘served to kill their interest in the subject’. Chris believed that students come into the classroom with misconceived ideas about history as a subject that required them to ‘memorize a lot of information’ but without knowing much else about the discipline. Similarly, he had not thought much about his students’ ideas about accounts except that they read accounts ‘at face value’ or as ‘information to be learnt’. Chris was predisposed to viewing these ideas in deficit terms and believed that students needed to be steadily ‘guided’ – using everyday analogies they could understand – to recognize that ‘different people were entitled to have their own different opinions about issues’. In developing their understandings, he would inform his students that ‘different accounts were written’ as a result of historians ‘reading different sources’ and subsequently, ‘formulating their own conclusions’ based on ‘their opinions and views’. Chris believed that once students ‘are taught’ these aspects, they ‘should have no problems explaining why accounts are different’.

**Teacher F: Mr. Faizal Rahim, male Malay, in his mid-30s (S7)**

**Faizal** had been teaching secondary school history for about eight-and-a-half years in the same school. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and was a Head of Department for Pastoral Care when he participated in this study. Faizal believed that learning history was like an initiation into a subject that was ‘wonderfully exciting, fascinating, intriguing, mysterious and stimulating’. He believed that an understanding of the past was an important aspect of a child’s education as it helped ‘develop a sense of empathy to enable them to appreciate the present’. Nevertheless, Faizal recognized that his students come into the classroom with negative perceptions about the subject and constantly found himself in the position of ‘experimenting with a variety of teaching strategies’ to sustain their attention. He believed that the key to student learning was ‘to maintain their level of interest’ and as such ‘the role of the teacher could never be over-emphasized’. While acknowledging a ‘spectrum of abilities’ in his class, Faizal was nonetheless convinced that many of his students do not fully understand the nature of accounts as they have yet to grasp the concept of ‘provenance’. He supposed that the brighter students would be able to attribute differences to ‘the motive or purpose of the author’, but only if the ‘discrepancies between the accounts were obvious’. Mostly, however, his students’ pre-existing understandings about accounts were not sufficiently useful and would require ‘some time to develop’. In developing their understandings about accounts, Faizal believed that the challenge would be to teach students ‘the skill of evaluating the reliability of the account’ by demonstrating to them the ‘salience of provenance and its relationship to the motive of the author’. According to Faizal, students needed to be ‘programmed’ to ‘question the provenance and relate it to the motive of the author’ as they would not be able to

readily explain ‘the bigger issue of why there can be more than one interpretation’ of the same event in history.

**Teacher G: Mdm. Aisha Begum, female Indian-Muslim, in her mid-40s (S48)**

**Aisha** had more than 25 years of teaching experience and had over the years taught many secondary school students across different ability levels. At the time of the interview, she was teaching history to Normal (Academic) students at a ‘neighbourhood’ secondary school in Singapore. She was also in the process of completing a PhD in critical literacies, having secured a Masters in Education in 1997 and a Bachelor of Arts degree in the early 1980s. Aisha was strongly emphatic in her view that ‘history is the interpretation of historians’, and even invoked God’s powerlessness in ‘changing history’ the way historians could. Given the seeming omnipotence of historians, Aisha placed emphasis on the ‘need’ to look at historians’ accounts ‘in a very critical way’. While acknowledging the difficulties of teaching history due to practical concerns and students’ limited proficiencies, Aisha saw the value of school history in cultivating ‘critical skills and critical literacy’ among students. She recognized that students come into the classroom with ‘prior ideas’ about history, along with ‘a preference for certain learning styles’. Nevertheless, Aisha remained unclear as to the kinds of prior ideas students had about history, and was ill-at-ease when asked about her ideas about students’ understandings of accounts. Other than confirming that her students would not have problems explaining different accounts as they had ‘learnt how to detect bias, measure the reliability of the sources, and analyze critically the usefulness of the sources’, Aisha often reverted to the constraining factors (or what she termed as the ‘learning, linguistic and psychological deficits’) that impeded students’ understanding of

accounts. When pressed on how students' understandings of accounts could be developed, Aisha suggested that students should look at the 'provenance' and the 'motives behind the texts'. As her emphasis was on history as 'the interpretation of historians', a key strategy she proposed would be to have students 'find out about the author' and the author's 'purpose in writing the account' when explaining 'the different interpretations of historical events'.

**Teacher H: Mr. Andy Goh, male Chinese, in his late-20s (JC06)**

Andy holds a Bachelor of Arts degree (with Honours) in history and had been teaching in a junior college for 16 months at the time of the study. For Andy, history is 'indubitably about perspectives' as the discipline itself 'is subjected to the perspectives of those who study it'. As 'a subject that epitomizes critical and analytical thinking', Andy reasoned that the limited curriculum time did not allow him to 'foster thoroughly a critical mind' among his students. As a result, he noticed that students 'did not find the learning of history through concepts helpful' and were inclined to 'depend on model answers' and 'mastering the skills of answering essay questions' as part of their learning strategy. Andy appeared to place the responsibility of such 'deficit thinking' on the misconceptions students had about the subject, as many were 'doing history without realizing the rigour or demands of the subject'. While recognizing that students differed in terms of their understandings of accounts, he insisted that most students were more likely to work with simple ideas such as 'history is about the winner writing about the loser' or that 'historical accounts differ because one is biased'. Accordingly, Andy expressed general pessimism about his students' ability to move beyond the simple idea of 'accounts as representing the author's personal bias' to more complex ideas about accounts that

differed in terms of their ‘story focus’ and ‘author perspectives’. Consequently, he did not believe that students, on their own, would be able to reach a firm understanding about the nature of accounts. Furthermore, at 17-18 years of age, Andy felt that most of his students still ‘may not have the analytical tools to give a comprehensive and broad answer’ in response to a question that required them to explain why there were differing or competing accounts of the same events in history. While acknowledging that it would be ‘tough’ to get students to develop more advanced understandings about accounts, Andy supposed that the way forward would be to first ‘get rid of those simple ideas they are working with’ and subsequently ‘show them that accounts are written based on the perspectives of the authors’. Part of that strategy would include providing students with the opportunity to account for the ‘discrepancies in terms of the purposes and the resources used in constructing the different accounts’.

**Teacher I: Mr. Nathan Chong, male Chinese, in his mid-30s (JC02)**

**Nathan** had been teaching for nine years after graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in history and upon completion of his postgraduate diploma in education. He had only recently assumed a Subject Head position at the time of the interview, and was teaching history at a lower-tier JC after having spent eight years teaching 17-18 year old students in one of the top JCs in Singapore. Nathan believed that history is a multidisciplinary subject which explored the breadth and depth of many other subjects like geography and economics. He believed that the study of history provided ‘a certain level of intellectual foundation for our students to cope with the changes happening in Singapore, the region and beyond’. Nonetheless, even if he was convinced that history was ideal as a subject that trained students in critical

thinking skills, he was finding it difficult to approach history in such a way due to the academic profile of his current crop of students. He found that he had to compensate for their lack of intellectual finesse by ‘unfortunately doing all the ground work for them and presenting them with the best possible options’ in terms of interpretations and answers to questions. While acknowledging the limited proficiencies of his students, however, Nathan was aware of the kind of historical thinking and dispositions that he wanted them to acquire. Concerning accounts, for example, he recognized that his students come into the classroom ‘realizing that there are multiple, biased voices’ about the past. Yet, he was also aware that ‘they recognized that being biased does not make you unreliable’. He acknowledged that his students understood that ‘multiple perspectives are important to make people realize the complexities of certain issues’ but he maintained that they also ‘needed to know how to judge each of these perspectives’. To that end, Nathan believed that his students needed to be equipped with the disposition to ‘exercise critical judgement based on specific criteria’ when dealing with differing accounts. In his own words: ‘Rather than saying that this was a relativist state, that everything can be accepted, you have certain tools you can use from which you can arrive at a conclusion. In the end, what needs to be done is to let students know that there will *not* be an ideal story but one that best fits the criteria of truth or objectivity or other principles historians used to judge the accuracy of an account’. For Nathan, the way forward in developing students’ understandings about accounts would lie in the familiarity the students have with the ‘tools that historians used as part of their job’. This may involve helping students to use the historian’s tools to ‘sieve out the multiple voices’ they could hear in the different accounts and ‘perhaps come up with an acceptable interpretation’ that best fits their criteria or ‘that is based on the agreed principles’ of

historical writing. Out of all the teachers interviewed, Nathan may be the only one to have explicitly spoken about the need to develop students' pre-existing understandings about accounts, and appeared to have a clear strategy in place to move his students forward. Nonetheless, this conviction was moderated by his acknowledgement of his students' perceived intellectual and linguistic weaknesses, which led him to make academic 'compromises' that he found to be 'not ideal'.

*Discussion: Relating the response categories to teacher's thinking about students' ideas*

As seen in the brief narratives above, each interviewed teacher appeared to be working with a set of assumptions that may be akin to the ideas expressed by the general population of teachers involved in the survey. For instance, all the teachers interviewed appeared to recognize that some (or most, depending on the teacher) of their students may work with deficit ideas about the nature of accounts in history. These may range from the assumption that their students held simplistic and superficial notions of accounts that were one-dimensional, inaccurate and flawed, to the assumption that all accounts are by their nature subjective, partisan and reflective of the motives of their creators. Several teachers (like Elizabeth, Susan and Faizal) attributed such deficient thinking to some students' inability to see beyond 'the correct narrative', while other teachers (like Chandra, Salim and Nathan) explained such deficiencies in terms of students' innate scepticism about the validity of any 'truth-claim' made by authors of accounts. Teachers like Chris and Andy, however, pointed instead to students' incapacity to appreciate the intrinsic worth of the



discipline, which resulted in them expressing ideas about accounts that were both discrepant and simplistic.

Another characteristic common to the responses of all the interviewed teachers was the emphasis given to an author's *perspective* when highlighting certain flaws in students' ideas, or when proposing some ways students should *correct* their thinking. For Elizabeth, Susan, Faizal and Aisha, for example, students' unitary idea of the correct narrative was the result of the latter's lack of awareness of the identity of the authors and the different ways these historians had approached the writing of their accounts. Others like Chris, Chandra, Salim, Andy and Nathan recognized that these simplistic ideas may be due instead to students' lack of exposure to different versions of events or their propensity to pre-judge all accounts as serving the interests of their authors. Nevertheless, while all the teachers spoke about the need for students to gain a better understanding of *perspectives* in history, their conceptions of what was meant by an author's *perspective* differed. These ranged from low-level notions of 'perspective' as an author's right to an opinion freely expressed, to more sophisticated understandings of perspective as inescapable and necessary in the construction of an account.

As the pilot and survey data revealed, teachers in Singapore generally were not predisposed to think about history teaching and learning in terms of understanding students' ideas about accounts. The responses by almost all interviewed teachers appeared to echo these sentiments. Judged according to the framework in Figure 6.3, almost all the teachers interviewed *may appear* to belong to Category 1 (or the Unreflective classification), as evidenced by their initial reticence in responding to

research concerns that were not entirely theirs to ponder. Indeed, the frequently furrowed foreheads and long silences which accompanied questions about students' ideas about accounts indicated the teachers' own discomfort at dealing with aspects they had not thought about or deemed relevant to understanding. Nonetheless, *when pressed*, all of them seemed to demonstrate some familiarity with the ideas their students might be working with about accounts. The interview data (to an extent) indicated that the teachers not only had some notion of these prior ideas, a few also seemed aware of the strategies they might have to put in place to 'correct' possible misconceptions. The subsequent discussion below raises three pertinent observations that emerged in the reading of the interview data that may suggest ways of construing teachers' approaches in managing students' understandings of accounts.

*a) Correcting ideas that 'block' understandings – tackling student misconceptions or addressing teachers' misplaced assumptions?*

Interestingly, from the interview responses, teachers' assumptions about the kinds of ideas their students were likely to bring into the classroom appeared to parallel the range of ideas students themselves were believed to hold about accounts. Although these assumptions and expectations were mostly limited to the 'low-level' types, the teachers were able to highlight instances of students working with deficient ideas that were deemed as impeding understandings or as 'not helpful' in the learning of history. With the exception of Nathan (and to a certain extent, Chandra), the other interviewed teachers seemed to work with the assumption that a lot of these prior ideas were essentially insufficient understandings that first needed *correcting* before any useful knowledge (or proper understandings about accounts) could be taught. While they were not entirely specific about the nature of corrective strategies that

would need to be put in place to tackle students' misconceptions, the teachers' responses appeared to suggest that the onus was on the students themselves to get rid of these mistaken ideas.

Teachers like Elizabeth, Salim, Chris and Faizal, for example, were convinced of the need for students to be actively involved in correcting their own preconceptions. Not surprisingly, much of their responses made references to students' self-initiated strategies for regulating their own learning and/or thinking; this could be seen when comments indicating faulty reasoning were frequently couched in terms that implied students' own failure to correct pre-existing misconceptions despite teaching, such as: 'They should already know that...' or 'They should have learnt that...' or 'They must try to understand that...' and so on. Interview responses from these four teachers appeared to suggest that teaching – as a means of managing students' misconceptions – would not count for much if students themselves failed to learn much from what was (presumably) taught. Yet, such a teaching strategy rested on an assumption that simply *telling* students which of their ideas were wrong, and subsequently *telling* them what the correct ideas should be, is sufficient to change students' ideas. Even if these teachers were not far off the mark when it came to 'predicting' the kinds of ideas their students held about accounts (particularly with regard to those with less sophisticated ideas), their responses indicated that the teachers may not have understood that such discrepant ideas would have to be addressed in more complicated ways than by simply 'telling'.

Susan and Andy shared similar sentiments with Elizabeth, Salim, Chris and Faizal. They also viewed students' preconceptions as mostly not useful and as not helping in

developing students' understandings about accounts. But unlike the four teachers, Susan and Andy were not keen to dwell too much on students' preconceptions and would rather get rid of any pre-existing ideas students might hold. As one who viewed history teaching in terms of equipping students with the 'correct knowledge about the past', for example, Susan preferred to treat students as blank slates than deal specifically with unhelpful prior ideas. She hoped that students would 'automatically realize that they had been working with inaccurate ideas about history' through her teaching and to subsequently 'make the necessary adjustments'. Andy, too, saw no use in addressing students' prior ideas or in using them for instructional purposes. He believed that they were likely to be 'simple ideas' that would require 'a total overhaul'. Instead, he preferred to wipe the slate clean of students' prior ideas and from there, build proper understandings through cultivating critical thinking skills that were discipline-related.

As mentioned, all the teachers interviewed seemed aware that students come into the classroom with insufficient or discrepant understandings about history and historical accounts. Some worked with the assumption that these ideas were *self-defeating* as they not only blocked students' understandings but also held back students' thinking about the nature of accounts. Others believed that engaging these prior ideas was not something that teachers should find necessary or practical to pursue as an instructional strategy in the classrooms. Only two teachers were able to think about developing students' understandings about accounts in terms of *using* or *changing* students' preconceptions (see pp.265-267 below). In addition, teachers' responses also indicated their beliefs that students needed to be *told* about the *right way* of thinking since their initial ideas about accounts seemed to point to their lack of

capacity to reach towards higher understandings on their own. In some ways, some of these responses appeared to suggest that teachers may have placed a ‘ceiling’ in terms of what students were perceived to be able to do (or think) on their own. Not surprisingly then, changing students’ ‘wrong ideas’ (such as ‘only textbook accounts tell accurate stories about the past’) was perceived more in terms of getting students to ‘get rid of’ their seemingly intractable misunderstandings – which oftentimes remain unaddressed as students might end up simply assimilating the purported ‘right ideas’ to their existing misconceptions. Unless teachers themselves are able to understand the nature of students’ misconceptions, and reconsider their own assumptions about the nature of student learning, they may not be able to effectively help students develop better understandings about accounts in history.

*b) Using teachers’ own understandings as yardsticks to correct students’ deficit ideas – what counts as sound second-order understandings?*

Characteristically, suggestions to improve or move students’ understandings forward (only when prompted by the interviewer) usually took the form of what teachers themselves assumed were the right kinds of ideas their respective students should hold about accounts. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, these may point to the teachers’ own assumptions as to the kinds of *wrong ideas* that needed to be put right; on the other, they also reflected the kinds of understandings that teachers themselves held that were frequently used as yardsticks for understanding about the nature of accounts (which, of course, were likely to differ in range and level of understandings between teachers). Nevertheless, while these may be interpreted as the end understandings they were expecting their students to acquire, there remained an apparent gap in teachers’ accounts when they spoke about the kinds of ‘wrong’ ideas

students were assumed to hold as their default ideas, and the kinds of ‘right’ ideas they should be working with. More specifically, there was little mention of how students’ limited ideas could be explicitly used to help students progress in terms of their understandings.

All the teachers interviewed, for example, seemed aware that some of their students were likely to hold misconceived notions of a single or correct version of past events. While these pre-existing ideas were deemed problematic, the teachers held different ideas on what the ‘correct’ conceptions should be (or how the wrong ideas should be corrected). Teachers like Elizabeth, Susan, Faizal and Chris, for example, wanted their students to appreciate multiple versions of events as reflective of the valid viewpoints and opinions of their authors; as such, no single version should be privileged over others. However, Salim, Chandra, Aisha and Andy wanted students to go further by recognizing the *reasons* why there could not only be single, correct accounts of events; given complex author-centred issues relating to perspectives and interpretations in history, it was reasonable to accept that there *will* be multiple versions (Category 4 in Figure 6.3). Nonetheless, these teachers stopped short of suggesting ways to develop students’ understandings beyond accounting for the differences in terms of an account’s authorial reference. Only Nathan made explicit mention of the need to further develop students’ understandings by getting them to use the ‘tools of the historian’ to judge the multiple perspectives and interpretations central to historians’ accounts of events.

In thinking about correcting students’ perceived misunderstandings, some teachers appeared to work with less sophisticated understandings about accounts than others.

Faizal and Aisha, for example, wanted their students to understand that accounts were necessarily connected to the different motives their authors had, especially as some authors may ‘manipulate’ or intentionally use the evidence ‘for whatever reasons – be it political or economic’ (Aisha). Expecting their best students to provide such explanations as to why accounts differed, however, may be unlikely to get rid of students’ simplistic or deficit understandings; in fact, these teachers may simply exacerbate students’ misunderstandings or strengthen students’ misconception of accounts as deliberate distortions of the truth by malignant historians. Similarly, in explaining why accounts differed, Susan and Chris wanted their students to understand how ‘human bias works’ (Susan) and how such bias would predictably lead to ‘different perspectives’ (Chris). Their notion of *perspectival* differences in accounts, however, appeared to be limiting as they viewed ‘perspectives’ simply in terms of the right of creators of accounts to freely express their personal opinions on matters of historical interest. In this sense, their best students are encouraged to regard accounts as simply the subjective but valid ‘opinions’ of their respective authors.

Such ideas on the part of teachers such as Faizal, Aisha, Susan and Chris may render any strategy to correct students’ ideas potentially unproductive as it is in danger of leading to weaker students picking up similarly deficit ideas. More damagingly, it also could obstruct the development of advanced understandings for students who had been (up until then) operating with workable conceptions about accounts. On the other hand, teachers like Andy could be seen to operate with sophisticated ideas about accounts and appeared to have a good grasp of disciplinary history. Even then, such levels of sophistication may not necessarily translate to better teaching methods

as most of his responses appeared to indicate a predisposition to impose his own understandings and expectations about what students *should* know, rather than demonstrating a readiness to draw out and engage students' ideas on their own terms. By positioning his ideas about historical perspectives in 'high level' or 'critical' terms, Andy may run the risk of teaching complex ideas to his students before they have even understood simpler ones. Using his own yardstick to decide what students' ideas should be like but without engaging their prior conceptions may cause his students to simply assimilate the taught knowledge to their existing misconceptions.

*c) Using ideas that 'block' as 'builders' to understandings*

Despite the predominant view that students' prior ideas served to block the development of more advanced understandings, there were indications that some teachers recognized that students' ideas may not necessarily be simplistic or lacking utility. Even as Chandra lamented his students' overly critical approach of casting all accounts of history as 'biased' sources, for example, he believed that most of them were able to operate at fairly sophisticated levels when asked to consider different accounts. For him, his students' pre-existing scepticism about the nature of historical accounts would lead them to suspend judgement on the claims or arguments each account was trying to make until they had an opportunity to 'do a bit more digging' as part of engaging in 'good historical enquiry'. While agreeing that some of his students may work with simplistic notions of bias and subjectivity, or take one-sided positions when dealing with accounts, Chandra recognized that his better students would be able to formulate ways to distinguish accounts based on criteria such as authorial perspective and background, the accuracy of evidence used, as well as the



context in which the account was written. In this sense, Chandra could be said to have fairly good understandings of the range of ideas his students were likely to hold about accounts. Also, he seemed responsive to certain things that needed to be done to change ideas that may not work. For instance, Chandra was aware that some of his students were working with the misconception that all historical accounts were necessarily ‘biased’ (i.e. partisan) versions of events. Rather than *telling* them that they were ‘wrong’ to think in such terms, Chandra used the students’ default thinking to explain that while ‘bias is inherent in all accounts [...] this does not mean that all accounts are equally untrustworthy’. Chandra’s strategy was to provide students with opportunities ‘to figure out on their own through student-initiated enquiry’ the different ways in which an author’s perspective, background, context, as well as political and social beliefs, may have shaped the historical account that he/she wrote. By addressing ‘wrong’ ideas (or ‘blockers’) and demonstrating the ways in which students’ initial conceptions may have been self-limiting (used as ‘builders’), Chandra hoped that his strategy would move students’ understandings forward and alter their prior ideas regarding vested interests and inherently partisan motives in the writing of accounts.

Similarly, Nathan believed that the ideas his students have about ‘bias’ may have developed as they acquired deeper understandings about accounts through overt teaching, as well as through constant exposure to ‘good source-work’ and evidence-based strategies in the classrooms. For instance, while many of his students were apt to view ‘bias’ in terms of intentional distortions or the tendency for historians to ‘take-sides’, their preliminary ideas about ‘bias’ changed as they became exposed to multiple versions of events. Nathan believed that presenting students with access to multiple accounts was important as it provided them with the means ‘to realize that

there are multiple voices' amongst the many accounts in history. Nathan saw that developing his students' ideas about 'author bias' was central in getting his students acquainted with more complex aspects of the discipline such as the notion of 'perspectives' in history. As he intimated,

At this level, I think students can instinctively comprehend the biased nature of accounts in history. Let's imagine asking my students this question: 'Why are there so many versions to a story?' Their answer would be: 'They are biased'. I think when they come into a JC they are able to think along those lines. My concern is: how do I translate that understanding, that simple understanding, to complicated historical texts? How do I convert that simple idea and get them to understand the complex nature of historical knowledge? That is my biggest problem. And as far as I'm concerned, these things can be developed. Students need to be exposed to multiple accounts and varied source-based materials to sharpen their ability to write effectively on complex things in history, such as historians' perspectives, how they construct historical knowledge, and so on.

Clearly, Nathan was aware that his students have initial ideas that, even if limited, could be used to move the ideas forward towards more advanced understandings. As part of developing more complex understandings about 'perspectives', for example, Nathan was explicit about using his students' 'simple understanding' of 'bias' to build firmer ideas on 'perspectives' in historical accounts. These included getting students first, 'to recognize that multiple perspectives are important in order for people to understand an issue in all its complexity', and second, 'to understand that an account cannot be perspective-free as the person writing it is a product of his environment'. Nevertheless, knowing such aspects alone may not be enough. Nathan felt that teachers should not leave students with the notion that 'all perspectives are valid' even if 'we think that they are all important to allow us to understand an

issue'. Moving students' ideas forward would mean equipping students with 'certain tools' they can use to distinguish between accounts or the perspectives these accounts may hold, and to 'ultimately' help them to 'exercise judgement based on criteria'.

Chandra's and Nathan's responses pointed to three key aspects of their thinking about students' preconceptions: first, the awareness that the kinds of ideas their students held about accounts were not altogether simplistic or unhelpful; second, the recognition that students' misconceptions could be used or changed to help build workable conceptions that can move their ideas forward; and third, the awareness of possible strategies that could be put in place to help students develop more advanced understandings about the nature of accounts in history. Their cases demonstrated how a teacher may view potential 'blockers' and use these prior ideas to serve as 'builders' in the development of further understandings. In Nathan's case, however, the recognition of students' misconceptions about the notion of 'bias' in accounts was overtly used to develop more sound understandings about the nature of 'perspectives' in history. Through explicit teaching, he was able to build on students' initial ideas about 'author bias' towards what he conceived as a more sophisticated way of looking at the nature of the author's voice and the influences that may shape the accounts he/she writes. For him, recognizing 'author bias' in accounts should not be seen simply as a matter of partisan interests that had the effect of distorting the *truth*; a more advanced understanding would necessarily require students to view authorship issues more in terms of the legitimate perspective or standpoint that the author takes that may on one hand be inescapable, but yet arguable based on criteria or when evaluated against a set of agreed principles and standards of historical writing.

### **6.5 Comparing students' ideas about accounts and teachers' assumptions about students' ideas: Points of congruence?**

Much of the discussion in this chapter has suggested that teachers are likely to have their own mental apparatus for handling the kinds of ideas students bring into the classroom, particularly with regard to their assumptions about students' ideas of accounts, and whether they view these ideas as helpful for teaching. In exploring both teachers' and students' ideas, one key issue that emerged was the ways (or degree) in which teachers' assumptions about students' ideas may be said to be congruent with ideas the data suggest students in Singapore hold about accounts. The analysis of the available data, however, indicated that such an association was difficult to determine in any easy way. The notion that emerged was one of an interconnected web of teacher beliefs – about history and aspects of historical writing, about the nature of historical knowledge, about the goals of history teaching, and so on. These 'clustered ideas' in turn appeared to influence their assumptions and expectations about students' ideas and historical understandings. This section provides a first, qualitative account of congruence between teachers' assumptions and students' ideas about accounts given the limitations set by the research design. Two points on 'congruence' of ideas are tentatively explored: first, the extent to which teachers shared some of the ideas students in the study appeared to hold, and the ways they differed; and second, the extent to which teachers were able to 'predict' student ideas, or held misconceived expectations of those ideas.

As suggested in the discussion of teachers' ideas in section 6.4 (see p.243 onwards), teachers' ideas about accounts appeared to broadly parallel students' conceptions of accounts. For example, teachers whose ideas may be placed in Categories 1-3 in the classification framework (see Figure 6.3 on p.242) and those who viewed students' ideas in terms of 'static and binary' conceptions (see section 6.3.2), appeared to share similar orientations about accounts with students in the 'Factual' category (see Figure 5.8 on p.201). The indications in the data are that these teachers (like some students) were likely to have a conception of historical accounts as 'objective', 'fixed' and serving as accurate reproductions of the past. Teachers placed in Category 4 and who viewed students' ideas in terms of 'subjectivist and perspectiveful' conceptions also may appear to share similar ideas about accounts with students in the 'Multiple-Factual' category. These teachers and students were likely to view different accounts as a manifestation of the complexity of history brought about by differences in authorship-based considerations such as perspectives, standpoints and interpretations. In the same way, teachers placed in Category 5 and who viewed students' ideas in terms of 'dynamic and multi-dimensional conceptions', were likely to share some students' ideas in viewing the nature of accounts in disciplinary terms, where each account can be evaluated against criteria set by the community of historians.

In considering the specific ideas that teachers and students held about the *nature* of accounts, however, the parallel may not be as clear-cut; responses seemed to suggest that ideas about the nature of accounts may not be understood in the same way by teachers and students even if they appeared to talk in the same way. First, there is evidence to show that both teachers and students seemed predisposed to think about

accounts in substantive terms, where a lack of understanding of accounts was seen in terms of not having access to essential knowledge (for example, due to a deficient knowledge base or as instances of content comprehension failure). For teachers like Salim, for example, students were expected to be able to think about accounts in 'disciplinary' ways. Yet, his responses (during the interview) seemed to suggest that students only needed to know about content matters (such as what other historians have said about the event) as 'that is all they need to know about accounts'. On the part of his (very bright) students, however, there were clear indications that they were keen to 'know more about alternative accounts' so that they could understand 'why historians say different things' about the past. When shown the responses that his students provided in their task-sets and the ideas they discussed during the group interviews, Salim was clearly shocked that the impression he had of his students' ideas were inconsistent with the high-level ideas the students were capable of demonstrating when discussing the disciplinary nature of accounts and historical writing.

Next, both teachers' and students' responses appeared to suggest the notion of a correct and fixed account of history 'out there' against which other accounts could be judged. For some teachers, this may be seen in their attempts to put right students' (flawed) substantive knowledge to match the version they viewed as the 'most accurate'. Also, even if teachers were to regard certain ideas as disciplinary misconceptions, the approach (if taken) was one where these 'simplistic' conceptions were corrected in much the same way as correcting students' perceived substantive deficiencies, that is, by simply *telling* students 'the right answer'. For Susan, for example, students came into her classroom with either no ideas about history or with

negative ideas that were counter-productive to history. Her basic approach was to simply ‘tell’ students the ‘correct way’ of thinking about history and historical accounts as she reasoned that they needed to be ‘firmly shown that their ideas are not correct’. Nevertheless, a review of her students’ ideas in the task-sets and interview transcripts suggest that some of Susan’s Year 9 students, like Razak (see p.154) and Zhi Yon (see p.187), were working with ideas that may be considered to be more sophisticated than she assumed. Though limited, their ideas clearly showed that they were not content to view history as fixed stories about the past, and offered potential to be developed with proper teaching.

And finally, the analysis of students’ ideas across the ‘factual-to-criterial’ continuum (see Figure 5.8) pointed to a *range* of student preconceptions, suggesting that some of these ideas were not always ‘simplistic’, nor do they suggest ‘fixing’ by correcting substantive deficits. While most teachers’ predictions tended to be spot-on where low-level ideas in the continuum were concerned, their assumptions about students’ ability to work with more sophisticated ideas – especially in the criterial range – appear less so. As mentioned, only four teachers or 8% (of the total 50 who affirmed they had developed views about students’ understandings of accounts in the questionnaire) viewed students’ ideas in terms of workable conceptions. Students’ responses, however, indicated a higher percentage of students who operated with ideas along the criterial range that might offer teachers scope for development (31% in Table 5.3 and 32% in Table 5.6). Older students were found to operate with more advanced ideas about accounts in both categories of student responses, yet Nathan was the only JC teacher who recognized that his Year 12 students held ideas about accounts that were useful already or could be developed further. Andy, on the other

hand, viewed his students as generally unable to grasp complex ideas about accounts and saw the task of building proper understandings as one that would first involve a total overhaul of 'simple ideas'. While Andy's ideas about disciplinary history and the nature of accounts may be said to be quite sophisticated, his approach appeared to assume that 'wiping clear' the 'simple ideas' students held was a process that could be done without the need to identify, address and engage students' preconceptions. Even if he assumed that the 'simple ideas' may have been removed, chances are, these unchallenged misconceptions may exist as students' default mental frameworks to which new ideas are assimilated and built upon.

In the brief discussion about 'congruence' as presented in this section, there is no suggestion of causality (or the direction of causality) in describing how the range of ideas students hold about accounts relates to teachers' assumptions about students' ideas. In the first place, this investigation was not intended to yield such information; the design was essentially for an exploratory study of the range of ideas teachers and students hold about the nature of accounts in history. In any event, the issue of causality is problematic, and seen in the context of teachers' assumptions as observed in this study, there is no means to determine that teachers who thought about students' ideas in a certain manner (for example, as disciplinary misconceptions about accounts) would approach their lessons in a way that corrects those misconceptions. Likewise, there can be no assurances that teachers who are aware of a range of students' ideas (from simplistic to more sophisticated), will approach instruction in a way that targets improvements in students' conceptions about the nature of accounts. This is especially if the students themselves seemed to prefer teaching that is essentially transmission-based (i.e. of substantive content), or



when the practicalities of teaching in Singapore act to constrain teaching goals that are focused on conceptual change. Needless to say, however, if teachers are to be persuaded to reconceptualize their notions of student learning beyond traditional models of teaching, they need to be made aware not only of the range of preconceptions that students hold about accounts (and other second-order concepts in history), but also of the means to develop these preconceptions to help students respond to the challenges of understanding historical knowledge.

## 6.6 Conclusion

One of the issues that emerged when attempting to examine the data qualitatively was the extent to which there was consistency in terms of the teachers' written responses, with the practical beliefs they held about students' ideas. Indeed, there were limits as to how far the responses could be confidently interpreted, and more specifically, the extent to which teachers' assumptions or expectations about their students' conceptions coincided with the practical beliefs they held about students' ability to *do things* with these conceptions. As always with questionnaire data, caution is required in interpreting responses, and some were more difficult to interpret than others. On the whole, however, responses by many teachers in the survey indicated a predisposition to view students' prior ideas as problematic for history teaching and learning. While 'prior ideas' may have been conceived or understood differently by individual teachers, their responses appeared to indicate both a tendency to disregard the pre-existing ideas students bring into the classroom, as well as a disinclination to view such ideas as useful starting points to develop or build students' understandings.

The reasons for such apparent reluctance to think about student learning in terms of engaging students' preconceptions about history and historical accounts are not entirely clear. Perhaps, most local teachers may be said to operate with certain 'blind-spots' in their approach to teaching and learning, and as such, are unable to view their students' prior ideas as useful, or even helpful, in developing complex understandings in history. If so, then the teachers' lack of familiarity with such concepts or the fact that they were not 'trained' to think about teaching and learning in such terms may explain their responses to students' ideas. These 'blind-spots' also could possibly be seen in the polarity teachers appeared to suggest when addressing students' conceptions of accounts: i.e. as disciplinary misconceptions or workable conceptions. The idea that disciplinary misconceptions could be used as a learning strategy to develop workable conceptions about the nature of accounts may not have been entirely clear to many teachers. In this sense, socio-cultural contexts and institutional constraints may be shown to not only impede students' notions of history and the past, but also the assumptions teachers have about student understandings and history teaching. Operating within an education system that is content-centred, exam-driven and results-oriented, it is not surprising then that most teachers in Singapore have found it hard to think about teaching and learning in terms of how students learn history in the classroom (see Lee, 2005).

An important idea that emerged throughout the analysis of the teachers' responses in this study is the notion that teachers' assumptions could be seen as both limited and potentially productive (depending on how they might be viewed): 'limited' in that they demonstrated an assumption about students' ideas largely in terms of

deficiencies and constraints, but ‘potentially productive’ as their ideas hold some potential for thinking about strategies that could offer teachers opportunities to work with students’ ideas in more educative or productive ways. An immediate issue to address, however, is the lack of attention or credence paid to students’ prior ideas as being helpful starting points to help teachers address possible misconceptions. For most of the teachers interviewed, for example, developing students’ deficient understandings went only as far as getting students to appreciate or recognize the subjective and diverse nature of accounts in history – as an indication of stronger understandings. Yet, most teachers’ expectations of the kinds of progress students would need to make to achieve these ‘higher understandings’ remained imprecise and ill-defined. As most teachers had not viewed students’ preconceptions in terms of ideas that move across a continuum from less sophisticated to more sophisticated understandings, or viewed these prior ideas as relevant or useful for instruction, they were not likely to be able to think about students’ ideas in constructive ways or in ways that may suggest the use of such ideas as ‘builders’ to understandings. By conceiving students’ prior ideas in deficit terms and subsequently demonstrating a reluctance to draw out and engage possible misconceptions, teachers ran the risk of students assimilating the new knowledge taught into their default understandings. In these instances, even if the teachers’ ideas were more sophisticated and were used as means to equip students with more complex understandings, these could simply end up being assimilated as part of students’ faulty thinking as their initial misconceptions have not been addressed, engaged, or changed in the first place.

Teachers’ own conceptual grasp and understandings about the nature of second-order concepts in history (in particular the ways these potentially weak ideas would likely

affect student understandings), is a matter that raises serious issues that require addressing. As Shemilt (1980) emphasized, the teacher's grasp of the principles and processes of history teaching and learning could directly affect the growth and quality of adolescents' historical reasoning. In these instances, if teachers are shown to use weak or faulty arguments to describe how students' ideas could be changed, the 'corrective strategies' they put in place to help move these ideas forward might have the effect of obstructing students from developing more advanced understandings. This is not to say that there is a direct connection between teachers' ideas and students' understandings, or that the teachers would 'produce' or 'generate' the ideas students are likely to possess. Instead, the supposition proposed in this instance is that if teachers are themselves working with deficit ideas or misconceptions, they are likely to lead students to acquire such deficit ideas as well. And in Singapore's case – where the teacher is regarded as the one having 'all the right answers' – the impact of teachers' deficit ideas would in all probability lead to students assuming or taking on these ideas as their own.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications

### 7.1 Introduction

This study has explored the ideas students in Singapore hold about historical accounts, and teachers' assumptions about student understandings. This final chapter summarizes key aspects of the research and highlights some empirical results of the study. In focusing on the findings that are deemed central to the thesis, this chapter suggests some possible implications for history education in Singapore and discusses possible directions for subsequent research.

### 7.2 Empirical results of the study

This study was designed to achieve two basic aims, first, to investigate the kinds of ideas students in Singapore hold about the nature and status of accounts in history, and second, to explore the teachers' own assumptions about students' ideas and understandings. In both cases, students' and teachers' responses were mapped out through category systems that reflected the qualitative nature of the data as well as the range of students' and teachers' ideas. Two aspects about accounts were explored, namely the views students held about differences between accounts, and the moves they were likely to make when asked to decide the 'better account' between rival versions. The ideas that teachers have about their students were examined mainly in terms of their assumptions about students' understandings of historical accounts. Supported by empirical research in similar studies conducted in

the UK, Taiwan and Portugal, and the research outcomes of relevant educational studies (in particular, the principles of *How People Learn*), the main findings and conclusions of this study are as follows:

**1. Students have a range of preconceptions regarding historical accounts and explained apparent differences across three broad categories, namely, *Knowledge Deficits, Multiple Stories and Constructional Attributes*.** While a small minority of students (11%) chose to regard accounts as ‘not different’ if they are ‘telling the same story in different words’, responses from the majority of students indicated eight patterns of ideas that were used to explain differences between accounts. A third of the students in the study (34%) attributed differences in accounts to ‘knowledge deficits’ (due to inherent defects within accounts, the impossibility of verifying the truth in accounts, and problems brought about by gaps in historical knowledge). A smaller percentage of students (24%) explained differences between accounts in terms of their ‘multiple stories’ (as partial stories of a complex past or ones that were reflective of the subjective opinions of their authors). The rest of the students (31%) saw differences in terms of the ‘constructional attributes’ that characterized the writing of accounts (such as an acknowledgement of an accepted point of view, a focus on author-related issues including the historian’s background and beliefs, as well as the explicit recognition of accounts as selective reconstructions of events).

**2. Students employed a range of evaluative strategies when deciding between competing accounts, and were predisposed to select the ‘better account’ on the basis of three broad ‘moves’, namely, *Best Version, Merge or Tally, and Review Criteria*.** Among the students who proposed an evaluative strategy that was based on

a 'best version' approach (43% or 30 students), fourteen were inclined to select the 'best copy' that corresponded to the *factual truth* of what happened in the past. Seven students opted for the version that best fitted their own knowledge about the event, while the remaining nine suggested the importance of finding external or authoritative sources that could be used to support or verify a specific version/account. A smaller percentage of students (25% or 17 students) preferred a more integrative approach to selecting the better account with one group (seven students) opting for a 'counting' strategy to ascertain the majority view, while others (ten students) eschewed the option of the 'better account' preferring instead a 'combine' strategy that would consolidate all versions into a 'super-account'. The remaining students (32% or 22 students) focused on the need to put forward certain 'criteria' upon which a decision on what constituted as 'better' should be made. Eight students proposed that points of view within accounts be considered in terms of their objectivity and even-handedness in the treatment of particular events, some (nine students) preferred a strategy that examined the author, while others (five students) proposed that the better account be judged against construction criteria and standards of practice.

**3. Students' ideas about historical accounts may be viewed in terms of a factual, multiple-factual and criterial continuum.** In mapping out students' conceptions of historical accounts as a progression of developing ideas, there appeared to be broad shifts in students' ideas in terms of complexity and sophistication: from viewing historical accounts in a 'factual' manner as copies of a fixed and objective past, to viewing accounts as 'multiple' versions of a past that is complex and multi-faceted, to viewing accounts as selective interpretations of past events that may be evaluated

based on 'criteria'. This factual-multiple-criterial continuum also may be shown to describe students' implicit view of historical knowledge: from conceiving historical knowledge as fixed or given representations of a singular (factual) reality, to conceiving historical knowledge as productions of human minds and borne from (multiple) individual dispositions, experiences and viewpoints, to conceiving historical knowledge as re-constructions that are based on interpretation and therefore open to critical (and criterial) questioning. Progression may be seen in the shift of students' ideas from low-level types that assimilate simplistic conceptions about the nature of historical knowledge, to more powerful ideas that build on disciplinary understandings and treat history as a defensible form of knowledge.

**4. The preconceptions students in Singapore have about historical accounts may be said to be similar to the preconceptions held by students in other national contexts.** Many of the students' ideas that emerged in this study appear to parallel the ideas reported in findings of research done in other cultural contexts (Barca, 2005; Chapman, 2009; Gago, 2005; Hsiao, 2008; Lee & Ashby, 2000). Comparisons with the findings of the UK's Project CHATA and Taiwan's Project CHIN (from Hsiao, 2008), as well as the work of individual researchers such as Gago, Hsiao and Chapman, suggest some common patterns of ideas among students despite their different cultural backgrounds, instructional language, and institutional contexts. Some caution is required in this assessment since the methods employed all followed, more or less, the CHATA example. Nevertheless, the picture emerging so far, is one of viewing students as having a constellation of ideas about accounts that may be identifiable and mapped out along a progression in understandings.



**5. Most teachers viewed students' ability to understand accounts in terms of deficiencies and constraints; teachers who viewed students' prior ideas about accounts as useful conceptions were content to place those views in terms of 'Simple' to 'Complex'. These conceptions can be characterized by a continuum that ranged from (i) static and binary, to (ii) subjective and perspectiveful, to (iii) dynamic and multi-dimensional.** Out of the 93 teachers who participated in the survey phase of this study, 50 teachers (54%) affirmed that they had developed views about students' ability to understand accounts. From these 50 teachers, an overwhelming number (92%) appeared to view students' ability to understand accounts in terms of constraining factors or inherent deficiencies. These ranged from cognitive and linguistic constraints (32%), to personal, inter-personal, and socio-cultural impediments (40%), as well as to disciplinary misconceptions (20%). Only a small percentage of respondents (8%) viewed students' existing conceptions as being useful enough to allow them to exercise criterial judgment when differentiating or adjudicating between accounts. Many teachers, however, appeared to treat understanding of accounts in substantive terms, rather than as involving disciplinary or second-order concepts. Nevertheless, the latter groups of teachers (who viewed students' ideas in terms of disciplinary misconceptions and workable conceptions), are to some degree recognizing that students may be working with prior ideas or understandings about accounts that may need to be addressed and subsequently developed. From this recognition, the responses of these 14 teachers appeared to suggest that they were prepared to accept the characterization of students' conceptions about accounts as a continuum ranging progressively from (i) static and binary, to (ii) subjective and perspectiveful, and to (iii) dynamic and multi-dimensional.

**6. Interpretation of teachers' data allowed the construction of a framework for thinking about teachers' assumptions about student understandings of accounts.** The five-category classification for thinking about teachers' ideas demonstrated a developing reflexivity and reflected the degrees of cumulative awareness teachers may be said to have about their students' ideas and understandings of accounts. With higher categories seen to subsume preceding categories, the suggested categories/classifications appeared as follows:

Category 1: Unreflective – Students have no understandings of accounts

Category 2: Reflective – Students have limited understandings of accounts

Category 3: Reflective – Students have unitary understandings of accounts

Category 4: Reflective – Students have subjectivist understandings of accounts

Category 5: Reflective – Students have sophisticated notions about accounts

Underlying this framework, however, is the recognition that the nature of teacher thinking is admittedly complex, with frames of references about students' ideas and understandings being more fluid than the five-category hierarchy suggest. Nevertheless, as categories that reflected teacher *performances* (manifested in their interpreted responses to questions), the classifications may be useful in determining *instances* in which each teacher began to think about some of their students' ideas, and the extent to which the teacher was aware of the kinds of ideas these students held about accounts. Seen in this way, as the degree of reflexivity moved up to Category 5 of the framework, teacher thinking may be said to demonstrate both recognition and a full awareness of the range of ideas about accounts that students were thought to hold.

**7. Teachers' assumptions about students' ideas about accounts may likely affect their approach to historical instruction in the classroom.** Using the category-based framework as a guide, the analysis of the interview data suggests that teacher assumptions about students' ideas may influence the way history is taught and learnt in the classroom. For example, teachers like Susan and Andy who viewed students as incapable of having understandings about accounts (that were beyond 'limited' or 'unitary') would likely conceive prior ideas as blocking or hindering the development of proper understandings of accounts. Accordingly, their classroom instruction may not be planned on the basis of addressing students' preconceptions. Yet, as shown by the key findings in *How People Learn* and other related work, this is likely to lead to students simply assimilating new knowledge to their pre-existing misconceptions (Lee, 2005). Teachers like Chandra and Nathan, however, viewed students' ideas as existing within a range of challengeable preconceptions, and consequently, they were more likely to notice students' ideas or to view them as potential builders to further understandings. They also were more likely to use students' existing ideas to change or develop students' thinking through instituting proper strategies that help students abandon or modify existing misconceptions and build on workable ones.

### **7.3 Some possible implications for history education in Singapore**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the act of interpreting the collected data in this study must necessarily take into account the context and aspects of history education in Singapore. In Singapore's case, the seeming reluctance amongst teachers to help students come to grips with the complex nature of historical knowledge, and the

apparent lack of engagement in pursuing discipline-based or critical approaches to history education may have partly limited or discouraged interest in historical inquiry in the classroom. Nevertheless, for students to develop deeper understandings, they must be taught to think about accounts in terms of criteria, where the acquisition of more powerful ideas may initiate further shifts in developing their ideas about history and historical knowledge. In proposing a move towards a history pedagogy that is *receptive* both to an understanding of the epistemic and methodological underpinning of the discipline, as well as one that is *responsive* to the prior ideas and pre-existing understandings of its learners, this study raises some possible implications for history education in Singapore.

### **Implications on policy-making and curriculum planning**

In charting future directions and deciding on changes to raise standards of history education in Singapore, policy-makers and curriculum planners may want to consider (as well) the importance of engaging students' prior ideas and of teachers' proficiency at addressing these ideas. As discussed in Chapter 2, new initiatives are currently taking shape to raise standards in history education through the creation of a history curriculum that is based on an *inquiry approach* (MOE, 2012). While such a move is understandably important and necessary to enhance and improve pedagogy and instruction in history, talk of developing a 'historical inquiry' curriculum is fraught with challenges as this terminology is vaguely construed and susceptible to misunderstandings (as discussed in pp.75-77), especially if it is understood as simply an exercise in constructing personal opinions (Ashby, 2011). In addition, introducing a new initiative without recognizing the ways students learn, the kinds of preconceptions they bring into the classroom, and how teachers should go about

addressing these preconceptions, may reduce the efficacy of the intended changes in the new curriculum.

This study has argued that knowing about students' ideas *matters* in any attempt at influencing or improving historical instruction in schools. An approach that is based on historical inquiry would benefit from teachers knowing (and subsequently addressing) the kinds of ideas that students bring into the inquiry classroom. Knowing the range of students' ideas about accounts in history, for example, enables teachers to set relevant inquiry-based tasks that are designed to track the development of students' disciplinary understandings across a progression of ideas. A curriculum that uses historical inquiry as a pedagogical framework, supports it with ample opportunities for students to engage in rich tasks that are structured to develop their disciplinary ideas in history, and provides teachers with interventionist strategies or scaffolds to help manage students' pre-existing ideas is more likely to develop deeper historical understandings among its learners. Designing a framework for curriculum development with progression of students' ideas in mind would serve not only as a focal point for thinking about ways to improve students' ideas about history, but also offer opportunities for formative assessment strategies that are targeted at moving students' ideas forward.

Nonetheless, as this study has found, most teachers in the sample were not naturally predisposed to think about classroom instruction and student learning in terms of drawing out and addressing students' pre-existing ideas. In fact, for many teachers, students' prior ideas were seen more as constraints and deficiencies than as useful 'resources' for understandings, or as beginnings of ideas that could be used to build

workable conceptions. Furthermore, as already indicated, teachers' understandings of accounts (and their expectations of student understandings) appeared to be couched more in substantive rather than disciplinary terms. This suggests potential concerns over teachers' familiarity and proficiency in dealing with the disciplinary aspects or the 'historical concepts' such as 'accounts', 'evidence', 'significance', 'causation', 'empathy' and 'diversity' that frame the inquiry-based curriculum (MOE, 2012). Policy-making decisions would thus need to take into account 'capacity-building' measures (such as providing teachers with access to training courses, workshops and resources) aimed at deepening teachers' disciplinary foundation and augment their competencies in managing the development of student learning. This should involve equipping teachers with a stronger understanding of second-order concepts in history, and opportunities to get acquainted with important aspects of students' learning and cognition in history.

### **Implications for teaching and learning**

A key finding that emerged in this study as well as in other similar studies on students' ideas about accounts in the UK, Taiwan and Portugal, is that students have a range of preconceptions about history and historical accounts. As demonstrated in the discussion in Chapter 5 and 6 in this study, students' prior ideas may at times be found to be consistent with disciplinary knowledge about history. Frequently, however, these ideas were likely to be misconceptions that may impede the development of proper understandings if not addressed. Rather than viewing these misconceptions in terms of students' pathologies and deficits (Cornbleth, 2001), teachers should instead use these ideas to challenge students' understandings (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999). The findings in this study, however,

suggest that many history teachers are not fully aware of the *range of ideas* their students bring into the classroom; even if they were able to identify some deficit or discrepant ideas, most teachers also may have limited pedagogy to manage these ideas.

Nevertheless, if teachers in Singapore intend to help students develop better understandings about history and the past, they would have to be aware of the range of ideas their students hold about accounts (from low-level fact-based ideas to more sophisticated criteria-based ideas). They also would need to recognize the limitations of some of these ideas in terms of disciplinary understandings, and be able to devise helpful strategies to move students' thinking forward. What is needed, in a sense, are certain 'shifts' in terms of the teachers' orientation – for example, beyond treating students' ideas as deficient and unhelpful for instruction, beyond approaching history teaching simply as the transfer of correct knowledge about the past, beyond thinking about the nature of historical knowledge only in substantive terms, and so on – from what they are conventionally used to (see sub-sections 6.3.1 in Chapter 6 in this study and Afandi & Baildon, 2010). Two implications for practice can be summarized as follows:

- a) **Teachers need to be attentive and be more aware of the moves students make as they try to make sense of new knowledge.** Rather than chiefly emphasizing content, teachers should even more focus their instruction on being 'able to view the subject matter through the eyes of the learner, as well as interpret learner's comments, questions, and activities through the lenses of the subject' (McDiarmid, Ball & Anderson, 1989; p.194). If teachers are too preoccupied with content matters, they will not be able to 'listen' to their

students and identify possible misconceptions students might hold. Consequently, they might not be able to put in place corrective strategies to address and develop students' *understandings*.

- b) **Focus must shift in emphasis from 'teaching methods' to being familiar with students' ideas and having approaches for working with students' ideas.** More engagement should be focused on teaching goals as well as the ways to address and manage students' disciplinary misconceptions than on teaching 'methods' and 'techniques'. While teaching methods are useful to build up a teacher's repertoire, these methods present few problems for teachers once they are made aware of a range of techniques. But without clear teaching goals – if teachers lack any grasp of what aims might include, what objectives they are after, and what students bring into the classroom – 'methods' are unlikely to deepen students' understandings (Lee, 2011).

As suggested in this study, at the highest level of teacher-reflexivity was the demonstration of some teachers' awareness of the range of ideas students held about accounts and their ability to identify key shifts that may indicate opportunities for development or progression in students' understandings (see Fig 6.3, p.241). If teachers can recognize that new understandings are found to be constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences, their familiarity with students' preconceptions or pre-existing ideas will allow them to develop the conceptual tools to help students make sense of history (Ashby, Lee & Shemilt, 2005), and devise ways to help deepen students' historical understanding (Bain, 2005).



In thinking about ways to move students' ideas forward, however, knowing *where* to move students' ideas towards is as important as recognizing students' different starting points in terms of their understandings of accounts. For example, students in the study who viewed history as a fixed and real past were likely to regard historical accounts as accurate copies of the past to be committed to memory. Others who viewed all historical accounts as 'inherently biased' or as distorted interpretations by their authors would likely be distrustful of historical knowledge and the work of historians. In both instances, students' misconceptions about history and the nature of accounts are likely to deepen and become entrenched if not addressed. Knowing the means to identify, and subsequently address, students' misconceptions would involve teachers also devising means to move students' ideas forward. One way to do this is to help students acquire *disciplinary* ways of looking at history and the nature of accounts, not simply in substantive terms as demonstrated by many teachers in this study. This would entail helping students view knowledge about history in evaluative terms – using criteria, standards or assessment by a community of scholars (Seixas, 1993). This is not to say, however, that students should be expected to use these standards as historians have used them. As Lee argued, historical understanding is not all or nothing (Lee, 2005); in the same way, these standards are not all or nothing attainments and gradually, students can come to increasingly understand them.

### **Implications on classroom pedagogy**

As the recommended pedagogy for the new 2013 history curriculum, *historical inquiry* is seen as key to transforming a largely content-centred approach to historical

instruction into one that gets students to ‘appreciate the underpinnings of the discipline’ as they engage in the process of ‘doing history’ (MOE, 2012). As mentioned, however, the notion of ‘historical inquiry’ remains an entirely unclear one. As a pedagogical tool, inquiry can indeed offer opportunities to help students build understandings about concepts that are integral in the construction of historical knowledge. Yet, there are possible dangers as well, especially when inquiry is misunderstood as a process where children ended up cutting-and-pasting pieces of information about events in history, or when the notion of inquiry gets assimilated into simplistic ideas about how knowledge about history is constructed. As this study’s findings on students’ ideas might indicate, any attempts at introducing historical inquiry should involve putting in place a teaching strategy that is purposely designed to identify the range of students’ ideas about these ‘historical concepts’. The cautionary note raised earlier can be reiterated: if teachers fail to address the ideas that students hold about accounts or historical knowledge, any potential new understandings produced through historical inquiry might end up being assimilated to students’ existing misconceptions.

The results of this study suggest that a more ‘responsive pedagogy’ might be necessary to raise standards in history education in schools – one that is responsive to the needs of the learner, and that encourages the teacher to be consistently engaged with the ideas of the learner. The discussion of teachers’ views about student learning (in Chapter 6) pointed to some teachers’ belief that students’ discrepant ideas about accounts remained as they failed to properly remediate the faulty ideas even after the *correct information* was taught to them (pp.254-260). A more *responsive* pedagogy, however, provides students with opportunities to express

their ideas about the past, and offers them with the challenge of handling varied and multiple representations of particular historical problems. A key consideration would be to devise ways that enable students to see historical criteria or heuristics at work, as they develop their thinking and understandings about history. In the UK, Chapman's online history project which centred on establishing a dialogue between history students and professional historians provides an excellent opportunity for students to develop understandings about the nature of historical thinking as well as disagreements in historical interpretations (Chapman & Hibbert, 2009). Building on Chapman's structure, a possible approach to such a teaching pedagogy may be characterized by these elements:

- a) **Diagnostic teaching.** In developing a strategy to move students' ideas forward, the teacher would need to know students' pre-existing conceptions and their different 'starting points'. An initial teaching move (diagnostic in purpose and that starts from the structure of a child's knowledge) may involve drawing information about students' prior ideas through observation, conversations or questioning, and through reflecting on the products of student activity.
- b) **Establishing learner-centered environments in which teachers are aware that learners *construct* their own meanings.** Focusing on learner-centered environments does not suggest that we subscribe to the 'child-centered' and 'subject-centered' dichotomy. Evidently, understanding and responding to learners' prior conceptions is necessary for developing *disciplinary* understandings. Beginning with the ideas, preconceptions, and beliefs learners bring into the classroom, a *responsive* history teacher would develop

ways to make the subject matter accessible to learners and devise strategies that help learners develop their understandings about the discipline.

- c) **Frequent use of rich tasks and ‘scaffolding’ activities.** To provide disciplinary rigour and conceptual depth in developing more nuanced understandings about accounts, students could be given frequent opportunities to explore problems that are meant to sharpen their disciplinary ideas about history – where they could express their ideas about a historical issue, consider different ways to think about the issue, and apply or make use of what they have found in their inquiry to build deeper understandings.
- d) **Open discussions with students.** Teachers who are aware of a range of possible misconceptions would devise tasks that could serve as *cognitive challenges*, designed to ‘disturb’ students’ preconceptions. These may be done through active discussions where students’ responses are used as ‘feedback protocols’ to check for ideas that hinder understandings and need to be addressed, and ideas that can be used to develop further understandings.

The notion of ‘building new knowledge’ about historical accounts may be an idea that has been interpreted differently by groups of teachers in the study. Many of the responses, however, were premised by each teacher’s assumption as to how their students learn (best). These may range from learning by ‘telling’ students the correct knowledge or ideas, learning by repeated practical experience (drills), or learning by ‘doing history’ in inquiry-based settings. Regardless of these different assumptions, however, students’ learning is unlikely to lead to a ‘theoretical shift’ or a ‘conceptual change’ (Roschelle, 1995) if they are not given opportunities to make sense of their own learning or relate the new knowledge to what they already know. In such

instances, even if teachers are satisfied with how well their lessons had been carried out, the classroom experience may not have created a ‘jump’ in students’ understanding. Such neglect of students’ prior ideas may even result in students learning something that is opposed to the teachers’ intentions, and lead to students possibly assimilating newly-taught knowledge to their pre-existing misconceptions.

A responsive pedagogy in history education proposes that teachers be sensitive to the different ways students would likely view history and the world around them, and demonstrate ways to enable students to ‘suspend’ their presentist tendencies. By listening to students’ ideas, introducing rich tasks in their lessons (that challenge their assumptions about alternative accounts or competing claims in history, for example), and using intervention strategies as part of diagnostic teaching (such as in the form of feedback protocols to allow students to regulate their own understandings), teachers may gradually move students’ ideas towards more workable conceptions across a progression of understandings. Such moves may even be designed within an inquiry framework that the new curriculum has proposed.

### **Implications for assessment**

A classroom pedagogy that requires history teachers in Singapore to ‘get acquainted’ with and ‘be engaged’ in the development of their students’ ideas and understandings about history and second-order concepts in history would naturally necessitate a re-think in terms of how both teachers and curriculum planners have approached assessment imperatives. As mentioned in Chapter 2 and reiterated by teachers interviewed in the study, students, teachers, parents, school administrators, employers, other stakeholders and the Singapore society as a whole, place a high

premium on high-stakes examinations and academic success. It is hardly surprising then that the pressure to ensure that students do well in the examinations and the accountability that a teacher bears for students' academic performances have found their way into classroom teaching and learning. Within a crowded curriculum driven mostly by concerns over assessment objectives, pushing for a pedagogy that is responsive to the development of students' conceptual understandings in history may seem unrealistic.

A responsive pedagogy in history education, however, would necessitate awareness on the teacher's part of the affordances and constraints (Wertsch, 1998) posed by both curricular and institutional contexts. The attention spent on developing methods to train and prepare students to answer examination questions has reduced historical thinking and reasoning to sets of somewhat rigid, algorithmically-devised skills-related procedures (Afandi & Baildon, 2010). While these may help build students' capacity to deal with the requisite 'assessment objectives' tested in the examinations, they do little to build student's knowledge of history, or help develop this through, in turn, their understandings about the nature of second-order concepts in history. Nevertheless, even if the strong emphasis on examination skills appears to be a constraining aspect of classroom teaching, preparing students for examinations need not be done at the expense of developing students' ideas about the past or deepening their understandings about the nature of historical knowledge; these goals are not mutually exclusive but self-reinforcing in many ways. A history instruction that provides students with an opportunity to work intensively with historical sources and taught in a way that opens up historical knowledge to debate and conjecture can, in

positive ways, affect the growth of adolescents' historical reasoning and the quality of historical learning (Shemilt, 1980; Lee, 2005).

More importantly, however, major shifts in terms of the way teachers, schools, educational institutions and examination bodies view the intent and purpose of educational assessment would be essential if developing students' understandings in history is to be placed at the heart of history instruction in schools. Crucially, a case for strengthening the practice and use of formative assessment in schools (Black & Wiliam, 1998) also would have to be made if the child's education in history is to result in any significant or substantial learning gains. The emphasis on summative assessments, for example, must be tempered with an equal emphasis on formative assessments that are designed to adapt teaching to meet learners' needs in the classroom. Critical to an assessment model that attempts to adapt teaching to the varying levels of student understandings is the educator's awareness and sound grasp of the concept of progression of ideas in history.

As demonstrated in the exploration of students' ideas in this study (see Chapter 5), some students are already working with sophisticated notions about accounts that would allow them to distinguish criterial differences between competing or rival versions. Also, the wide range of students' preconceptions about accounts suggests the possibility of identifying students' diverse 'entry-points' so that their ideas could be developed in a *progressive* way. In other words, even if students are working with simplistic notions of accounts, with good teaching, they will be able to build a framework for making critical sense out of legitimate stories, and rationalize why certain histories offer alternative and competing accounts of the past. In its capacity

to suggest a workable trajectory by which low-level ideas can be ‘moved’ towards more sophisticated ones, a progression model of history could serve both as a useful basis for assessment as well as a diagnostic tool for teachers to address and develop students’ ideas (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1996). Using progression models, however, would require teachers, curriculum planners and assessment designers to be aware of the range of ideas students hold about conceptual aspects of history (such as those illustrated by the category systems on Accounts in Chapter 5 in this study). More important, such models should not be treated as ‘ready-made’ assessment schemes or ‘ladders’ to be taught ‘step-by-step’ (Lee & Shemilt, 2007). Instead, these models would best serve as suggestions for distinct shifts in students’ ideas to guide teachers in planning syllabus, instruction and assessment to match the different levels of competencies and attainments.

A move towards more formative assessments and one that is based on developing students’ ideas, however, would require the need for ongoing monitoring of students’ understandings and novel tasks that can help push students’ ideas forward. Such an approach would necessarily move teachers away from a mechanical way of teaching history and possibly challenge algorithmic tendencies in historical instruction (see Lee & Shemilt, 2007). Teachers would see teaching and learning activities as ongoing assessments where they could identify students’ prior ideas and use the evidence to confront possibly weaker ideas about history (such as notions of accounts as copies of a past reality, the idea that eyewitness accounts are more reliable than secondary accounts by historians, that different accounts are the result of historians exercising ‘opinions’ about the past, and so on).



## Implications for teacher education

As shown in the discussion in Chapter 6, many teachers in this study are not naturally predisposed to thinking about history teaching and learning in terms of their students' ideas. The findings in this study, however, have shown that some students have ideas about historical accounts that required addressing, and suggested that teachers would need to pay closer attention to these ideas, or know what to do with them. For a start, history education courses could focus on considering ways teachers can best draw out and engage the 'everyday ideas' that students are likely to use to make sense of the world, and to address possible misconceptions. Beyond simply thinking about strategies to teach content and skills, these courses also could aim to prepare teachers who are sensitive to students' ideas, who regularly engage with students' ideas, and who constantly think about strategies to move students' ideas forward. Teacher-educators also could help by designing research-based scaffolds that support practitioner use and that help serving teachers think more effectively about students' ideas. More exposure to progression models, and the ways pedagogical knowledge concerning children's preconceptions could be tapped to enhance classroom instruction, would be necessarily helpful for teachers attending pre-service and in-service training. The key idea is to sustain the conversation about the importance of addressing students' prior ideas, and to suggest ways for teachers to make use of research knowledge to make their teaching more responsive to students' needs.

Recent efforts to address apparent shortcomings in the teaching and learning of history in schools marked a conscious attempt on the part of the MOE to align local historical instruction to an approach that is *inquiry-based*, and one that focuses on

the development of students' historical understanding (MOE, 2012). Many of the ideas that shaped the development of the 2013 upper secondary history teaching syllabus, for example, were based on the UK's national history curriculum for Key Stage 3 as well as academic work by British history education researchers. While these developments are important steps taken to raise standards of history education in Singapore, a sustained effort also should be made to ensure that both beginning and in-service history teachers are well-positioned to take on the new demands of the upcoming syllabus. The preparation of teachers in the new inquiry-based approach to history teaching is critical to ensure that there is a fundamental shift in terms of how student understandings in history can be developed. Familiarity with notions of progression in historical understandings, however, is important if inquiry is to be used as the pedagogy to move students' ideas forward.

#### **7.4 Suggestions for future research**

Any attempt at reviewing the state of history teaching in Singapore may need to address at least three inter-related limitations: first, a low knowledge base due to the lack of research work into the cognitive aspects of history teaching and learning; second, a lack of awareness about the ways students' ideas can be shared, shaped or developed in history classrooms; and three, a predisposition to regard improvements in historical instruction primarily to new strategies that help build 'content' and 'skills' rather developing students' ideas and understandings. The findings relating to student ideas and teacher thinking in this study, however, remain tentative and isolated given the dearth of local research knowledge. Much research work would have to be initiated to test or build on the results of the current study, and

supplemented by new research designed to explore other aspects of students' ideas and teachers' thinking.

A possible follow-up would be further work that attempts to tease out the professional application of research-based findings on students' preconceptions, for example, in the form of practical strategies designed to help teachers move students' ideas forward. Mapping students' ideas must simply be the first step, albeit an important one, that would enable teachers to identify the range of student preconceptions, and to recognize the potential of viewing students' ideas in terms of a progression towards more sophisticated understandings. Subsequent work should involve figuring out how teaching could move students' ideas from one progression 'level' to higher levels of thinking in a systematic way. Such practice-based research, however, is not easy to carry out as it involves a high level of experimental work and the design of intervention tools that require repeated testing with both students and teachers. Nonetheless, these 'teaching experiments' are necessary to help researchers determine how different strategies may influence students' historical thinking.

Familiarity with students' ideas would help teachers identify students' misconceptions about the nature of historical knowledge and devise ways to move their ideas forward. As much research on history education has demonstrated, students come into the classroom with different ideas about history – as the past and as a discipline – and these different ideas may be the result of students coming into contact with stories at home and within their respective communities. A further point of research interest then, is perhaps, an attempt to examine how these different ideas came about and how different 'contexts' may have inadvertently played a role in

constraining the development of historical understandings among students. Naturally, other ways of seeing the past (and not just history) are legitimate too for their own contexts. But in developing *historical* understandings, simply giving students the stories they should know may not be the best way to get students to learn history (see Shemilt, 1980 and Lee, 1999). Accordingly, further research into the ways ‘contexts’ have shaped the way students think about the past, and how these may affect the development of their ideas across different age-groups, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations may shed further light on the ways students in Singapore develop their understandings about history. A cross-country comparative study with like-minded researchers across the world would help clarify the impact ‘contexts’ may have on the ways students develop their pre-existing ideas about accounts. Something along these lines has been done in the area of students’ ideas about historical significance (see Cercadillo, 2001). Further research across national contexts on students’ ideas about historical accounts could be carried out to build on the work already done in Portugal (Gago, 2005) and Taiwan (Hsiao, 2008), and the UK (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Chapman, 2009).

Recognizing the centrality of teaching in changing student learning does not presuppose a one-way operation; in fact, the converse also may be true, that is, that knowing about how students learn would consequently change teaching (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 1999). As teachers become more sensitive or responsive to students’ learning, they will become more aware of the ideas students bring into the classroom, the misconceptions students have about history and historical knowledge, and the kind of resources that may be used to build students’ understandings. This in turn raises the possibility of shifting the research focus onto other important aspects

of teacher thinking, such as teachers' prior conceptions about history, and about student learning. On one level, such work would involve helping change teachers' mind-sets about students, specifically from thinking about students' ideas in deficit terms to thinking about students' ideas as useful or potentially helpful in building better understandings. It may be the case that in helping teachers think about their students' ideas, we will have to start with the teachers' own preconceptions, assumptions and prior knowledge about students (and history), as well as the extent to which these may affect the way they think about students' learning.

As much as it is evident in the current study that students have a range of ideas and preconceptions about accounts, teachers' responses are also seen to be at different places when it came to thinking about students' ideas. Research that attempts to explore teachers' ideas about students' understandings would necessarily require the researcher to develop a means to interpret these ideas across a spectrum. For example, in the same way that we regard students who used 'criteria' to differentiate and decide between accounts as having 'more sophisticated or powerful ways of thinking', what sort of 'criteria' do 'sophisticated' teachers use when making distinctions between their students' understandings of accounts? Possibly, such research moves would involve developing tools to help identify where teachers are 'at' in their awareness of students' understandings, as well as some means to help teachers develop capacities in monitoring student learning and their own teaching.

These considerations seem to point to the importance of the teacher's pedagogical awareness, one that may be argued as necessarily buttressed by both a sound understanding of the historical past and a firm grasp of the methodological

framework that underpins the historical discipline. Nevertheless, as observed in the responses of teachers in this study, many of them were predisposed to thinking about accounts (and students' understanding of them) in substantive terms. Perhaps, this points to the recognition of the importance of substantive knowledge in the learning of school history. Yet, this also raises several questions for further research: does a high content knowledge a teacher possesses about history necessarily equate to a high disciplinary knowledge he/she has about the discipline? Would the best history teachers (in terms of substantive knowledge) be able to handle second-order concepts better, or teach history in a disciplinary way more effectively? Research by Wineburg (1991), McDiarmid (1994) and Vansledright (1996c) has highlighted problems regarding the relationship between sound disciplinary thinking in history with improved ideas about historical instruction in school. What, then, counts as good history teaching in the Singapore context?

Teaching has been described by some as 'a complex intellectual endeavour that demands disciplinary expertise, a deep understanding of students, and sophisticated pedagogical skills' (Hatch, 2006). Beyond standard pedagogy, teachers need to be more responsive in their engagement with students' preconceptions and be unceasing in their attempts to devise ways to develop, shape and sharpen students' understandings in history. The current study represents an initial step in generating research knowledge about the ideas and preconceptions students in Singapore hold about history and historical accounts. As the first study of its kind that attempts to investigate students' understanding of accounts in a Singaporean context, this study has important contributions to make – both in terms of building up research knowledge about students' historical understandings, as well as providing research

information to support a history curriculum currently undergoing significant development. Even though the findings generated by this study emerged from a particular kind of context and culture of historical instruction (i.e. the Singapore education system), they revealed recognizably similar patterns (at least for students' ideas) with findings of research conducted in other national contexts. Such a degree of congruence not only adds to the scope and range of existing literature about students' ideas, but also builds on the growing international picture of students' understandings about accounts in history.

More importantly, a distinctive element of this thesis is its specific exploration of both students' and teachers' ideas – an area that is of significant research interest and about which there exists little research. Unlike previous studies on historical accounts, this study also begins to ask questions about students' ideas about accounts, teachers' assumptions about students' ideas, and the possible relationships between them. Including the teachers' perspective in a study of this nature is important as much of the necessary groundwork that needs to be done in helping students develop further understandings in history rests in knowing how teachers themselves think about students' ideas and their assumptions about how their students learn history. Cognitive principles of 30 years of research into human learning (by the *How People Learn* project) apply as much to teachers as well as to students. If we want to change teaching, we first need to understand relevant teachers' ideas. This study has been limited to teachers' and students' ideas about accounts, and of course there are many other prior conceptions at stake. But it is hoped that this study provides both a pointer to an important future direction for research and the first small step in that direction.

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## Appendix-set 1: Pilot Task-sets and Pilot Interview Schedules

### 1a. Pilot Task-set 1: The Ming Naval Expeditions Task-Set

#### **Story 1**

##### Chapter 1:

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. After the Mongols were overthrown in 1368, the Ming emperors started rebuilding the country by repairing the Grand Canal, highways, bridges, temples and walled cities. The early Ming period also saw the restructuring of the administration, with the Confucian scholars appointed as senior officials and the eunuchs occupying high offices. But throughout the Ming period, these two groups of officials were constantly in conflict. However, it was the eunuchs who ran the administration during the reign of the third Ming emperor, Zhu Di. Zhu Di's desire to expand his sovereign rule and demonstrate the power of the Ming dynasty, led him to embark on overseas expeditions in the China seas and the Indian Ocean.

##### Chapter 2:

From 1405 -1433, under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He, seven naval expeditions explored and brought under the Chinese tributary system a large part of the Indian Ocean. The expeditions, however, were not well-received by the Confucian scholar officials in the Ming court. They criticized Zheng He's achievements and complained that it was too costly. The Confucian officials disapproved of these expensive expeditions, and argued for the need to develop internal trade instead. Moreover, as China was now fighting another barbarian enemy on its western borders, the country's financial and manpower resources were needed to confront this threat to her survival. The death of Zhu Di in 1424 led to the rise of the scholar officials, resulting eventually in the defeat of the eunuch administrators and the political strengthening of the conservative class.

##### Chapter 3:

By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ming dynasty had met their trade and security needs. With the repairs to the Grand Canal completed, it meant that China now had a more efficient inland canal grain transport route, which was safe from bad weather and pirates in the open seas. Increased political stability also made it unnecessary for China to embark on extensive diplomatic expeditions to extend its tributary system. In the years after Zhu Di's death, the Confucian scholar officials, with the support of the new emperor, began dismantling China's navy. Ships were destroyed and construction of new ships was halted. Eunuch admirals were dismissed, all naval explorations were suspended, and records of Zheng He's expeditions were burnt. China's self-satisfaction as the most advanced power in the world had caused it to abandon its overseas voyages. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by many countries.

#### **Story 2**

##### Chapter 1:

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. The third emperor of the new Ming dynasty, Zhu Di, dreamed of overseas expeditions to show the world the power and capability of the Ming dynasty. In 1403, he issued orders to begin construction of an imperial fleet of multi-masted "treasure ships" to extend Chinese imperial influence, and appointed a eunuch, Zheng He, as admiral of the imperial fleet. The naval expeditions, funded by the state, were to establish Chinese predominance in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. It was the grandest systematic exploration of the Indian Ocean carried out by a single country in a scale never before seen by the known world.

##### Chapter 2:

From 1405 -1433, under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He, seven naval expeditions explored and brought under the Chinese tributary system a large part of the Indian Ocean. With superior nautical technology and countless inventions that they put to good use, the Chinese were ready to expand their influence beyond India and Africa. But suddenly it decided to suspend all its expeditions. After the death of Zhu Di in 1424, China saw an internal power struggle, with the conservative Confucian scholar officials emerging triumphant. With the defeat of the eunuch administrators, China's maritime adventures came to a grinding halt. The conservatives destroyed all ocean-going ships, banned the construction of new ships, and destroyed all sailing records. These events marked the beginning of China's naval deterioration and signalled an end to the greatest navy the world had seen so far. It was a decision that would eventually lead to her poverty, defeat and decline.

##### Chapter 3:

By the end of Zheng He's voyages in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, China had become a strong naval power and established itself as a powerful trade and diplomatic force. The tasks Zhu Di had set his admirals had been successfully achieved. But as China began to withdraw from its naval ambitions, other forces, notably the Portuguese and Spanish began to take the opportunity to fill the vacuum they had left. China had thus missed the chance to establish itself as the first world power. If China had decided to pursue its ambitions, history might have turned out differently. It could have been the Chinese, rather than the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British, that could have colonized the world. If China had not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was stronger, more resilient and better equipped to fight off the technologically-superior foreign powers as they began to pry the country open in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a result, China eventually collapsed under the pressures of Western colonial onslaught, which began during the Opium War of 1840.

*Read the two stories above and answer the following questions:*

**Question 1:** Are there any significant events that are described in both Story 1 and Story 2?

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**Question 2:** Do you detect any differences in the plot presented in the two accounts? If NO, explain why you think there are no differences. If YES, what are these differences?

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**Question 3:** Read the two extracts given below:

*from Story 1*

In the years after Zhu Di's death, the Confucian scholar officials, with the support of the new emperor, began dismantling China's navy. Ships were destroyed and construction of new ships was halted. Eunuch admirals were dismissed, all naval explorations were suspended, and records of Zheng He's expeditions were burnt. China's self-satisfaction as the most advanced power in the world had caused it to abandon its overseas voyages.

*from Story 2*

If China had not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was stronger, more resilient and better equipped to fight off the technologically-superior foreign powers as they began to pry the country open in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a result, China eventually collapsed under the pressures of Western colonial onslaught, which began during the Opium War of 1840.

Some historians feel that China's decision to dismantle her navy was not really an important event; others feel that it was really important. What do you think? Explain why you think it mattered or why it did not matter.

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**Question 4:** Does the dismantling of Zheng He's navy matter the same way in both stories (Story 1 and Story 2)?

Choose one answer (YES or NO)

**YES:** If you think it does matter the same way, explain how.

**NO:** If you think it does not matter the same way, explain why not.

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**Question 5:** Look at the two accounts given below on the significance of China's decision to abandon its overseas voyages. Consider the reason why there is a difference in accounts.

*from Story 1*

China's decision, however, had not greatly affected her power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by the rest of world.

*from Story 2*

China's decision to abandon its overseas voyages signalled an end to the greatest navy the world had seen so far. It marked the beginning of China's naval deterioration. It was a decision that would eventually lead to her poverty, defeat and decline.

Does this mean that:

- a. no one knows because we weren't there?
- b. we do not have enough information to find out?
- c. it is just a matter of opinion?
- d. historians tend to take sides?
- e. the accounts are answering different questions?
- f. each historian think differently from the other?
- g. one of the stories must be wrong?

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Which of these sentences (a – g) comes close to how you would explain the difference in the accounts? Choose one sentence and put a tick in the box next to it.

**Question 6:** Explain your choice of the best sentence (a – g):

.....

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**Question 7:** If the sentence you chose (a – g) is not exactly what you think, describe what you really think.

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**Question 8:** Read the two accounts again:

*from Story 1*

China's decision, however, had not greatly affected her power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by the rest of world.

*from Story 2*

China's decision to abandon its overseas voyages signalled an end to the greatest navy the world had seen so far. It marked the beginning of China's naval deterioration. It was a decision that would eventually lead to her poverty, defeat and decline.

a. Is one account better than the other? If YES, why do you think so? If NO, why not?

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b. How could we decide which account is better?

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**Question 9:** Consider the following question:

How far do you agree with the claim that if two historians have access to the same evidence and artefacts, the 'stories' that they both write will largely be the same? Why do you think so?

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**Question 10:** Read the accounts written by three different historians below:

**A**

In the years after Zhu Di's death, the Confucian scholar officials, with the support of the new emperor, began dismantling China's navy. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by the rest of world.

**B**

With the defeat of the eunuch administrators, China's maritime adventures came to a grinding halt. The conservatives destroyed all ocean-going ships, banned the construction of new ships, and destroyed all sailing records. It was a decision that would eventually lead to her poverty, defeat and decline.

**C**

China had thus missed the chance to establish itself as the first world power. If China had decided to pursue its ambitions, history might have turned out differently. It could have been the Chinese, rather than the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British, that could have colonized the world.

a. On a scale of 1 – 10, how far do these three accounts **agree** or **disagree** about the **importance** of China's decision to dismantle its navy and abandon its policy of overseas naval explorations?

*Circle the number that best fits your answer.*

Agree    1       2       3       4       5       6       7       8       9       10    Disagree

Explain why you think as you do.

.....

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b. If you think these accounts **agree** (i.e. if you had circled 1 – 5), explain why any seeming differences do not matter.

If you think these accounts **disagree** (i.e. if you had circled 6 – 10), explain why you think historians write different stories about the same bit of history?

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*End of Task*

Thank you for your participation. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

## **1b. Pilot Interview Schedule (Group interviews with students)**

**1. Let me start by asking the three of you some general impressions you have about Singapore. Take a moment to consider where we are as a nation right now. Have things changed much in the past 40 years or so? Or have things stayed more or less the same?**

*Yes, things have changed much:*

In important ways or not?

What important changes in particular?

What makes these changes important?

*No, things have stayed more or less the same:*

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

Were there no changes or just no important ones?

**2. Do you expect Singapore to be more or less the same in 40 years' time, or not?**

*No, Singapore will be different:*

What kinds of changes do you expect?

Any important changes in particular?

What problems do you think Singapore might have to meet?

How do you decide?

*Yes, things will more or less stay the same:*

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

Will there any changes, or just no important ones?

What problems do you think Singapore might have to face?

**3. What history have you studied since you've been in school?**

Can you sum up what was going on in the history you've studied?

Can you tell me what the most important themes were, from your perspective?

**4. What did you learn from the history you've studied?**

About the world we live in?

About Singapore? About yourself?

About people in general, or particular kinds of people?

Has it had any effect on your view about the future?

- *What might happen or change?*

- *What should happen or change?*



**5. Do you think that history is an exceptionally difficult subject to learn in school, or not?**

Why do you think so?

What is so difficult about the subject?

*Concepts/Skills?      Why?      What's difficult about them?*

*Content?      Why?*

*Characteristics of subject matter of history?*

*Amount?      Knowledge / ignorance*

*Importance of factual accuracy?*

**6. Let's talk a bit more about Singapore history. When do you think Singapore's history started?**

*If Pre-1819 with the 'founding' of Temasek by Sang Nila Utama:*

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

Are there any problems when talking about Singapore history during this period?

Why do you think so?

*If 1819 with the founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles:*

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

If 1819, that means that it can't have any history before that, can it?

Did Singapore have a history before 1819?

*If 1965 with the declaration of Singapore independence:*

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

If so, how would you describe the period between 1819-1965?

[Did Singapore have a history before 1819? If (assuming) that you say this period is more mythical or legendary, does it mean that Singapore does not have any history prior to 1819?]

**7. If you had to sum up the story of Singapore history so far, from what you've done in school or from what you've heard at home (through the TV, movies, books, or anything else) –**

What kind of story would you say it was?

What sort of title would you give it?

**8. Now, do you remember the written task that I made you do earlier on about the two accounts on the founding of Singapore? Do you think that this issue about having two accounts of the same event is important, slightly important, or not important at all? Why do you think so?**

**9. What about for the historians (or your history teachers for that matter). Would they think that this issue is important, slightly important, or not important at all? Why do you think so?**

**10. Now I want you to look at some statements that I have here with me. It's quite similar to the ones that you did for the written task. But here, I would like you to firstly, consider this question: "Why do historians write two different stories about the same event". Next, between the three of you, I want you to rank these statements according to the order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 6, being the least important:**

- a) There can't be just one story because historians have different purposes/motives.*
- b) There are several stories of the same event because some historians are biased.*
- c) There are several history stories of the same event because these stories are written to fit different questions.*
- d) There is not enough information so historians write stories based on what they know.*
- e) Since no one was there, no one can really know what actually happened, so historians write history based on their own opinion.*
- f) Sometimes, people who witnessed the events did not leave behind any records, so historians have to guess what happened.*

[Follow-up each response with probes:

Why did you pick that statement as your first choice?

What's the difference between statement (a) and statement (c)? Or do you think they are the same?

How far do you think that historians are biased when they write their history stories?

Do you think a lack of information is a problem a historian faces each time he wants to write a history story?

Are history stories based entirely on historians' opinions? What should a historian depend on when he writes his history story? How do you distinguish history stories that are based on opinions (*and ones that are supported by evidence*)?

If there are no eyewitnesses to an event, will it be possible for a historian to write his story? Or will he have to make a guess as to what really happened?

**Leaving aside all these statements, if I were to ask you why two historians may write different stories about a particular historical event, what would you say?**

*Why do you think there are two contrasting accounts explaining the impact of Ming naval expeditions on China? Or two views on the founding of Singapore?*

**11. Now, I would like to ask you some questions about accounts or stories in history:  
What do you consider to be a historical account (or a history story)?**

What is the difference between a historical account and other kinds of story? If you were to browse through the shelves in a bookshop or a library, which book would you refer to as a historical account or a history story?

How do you separate a history story from other kinds of stories (*such as*)?

**12. How far do you think that historical accounts are ‘true stories’ about the past?**

How do you decide?

What makes the stories ‘true’?

**13. I’ve come to my last few questions and these are just general questions that are meant to give me an impression about how you see things:**

- a. If you wanted to know about Singapore politics, or wanted to know which, if any, political party you wanted to vote for or support, what knowledge would you need to help you make a decision?
- b. If you wanted to know about the economic situation in Singapore in the next 5 years – for example, whether jobs are going to be easier or harder to get, what knowledge would help you decide?
- c. If you wanted to decide how best to deal with race relations in Singapore, what knowledge would you need to help you make a decision?

**Would history help you to decide about any of these things, or not?**

Why do you think so?

Do you think that learning history is relevant to our future?

Yes/No: Why do you think so?

**END OF INTERVIEW:** Thank you again for your participation in this research project. All of you have been most helpful. I greatly appreciate your cooperation.

## 1c. Pilot Questionnaire (for Teachers)

### Personal Data:

*(Please be advised that all entries will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. Your comments will be accessible only to the researcher. This section is important in the event that the researcher finds it necessary to contact you with regard to clarifying certain points that have been made).*

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Male/Female)

Your school: \_\_\_\_\_

Your e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please circle the option that most accurately describes you:*

1. How many years have you been teaching history?

Less than a year

Between 1 – 3 years

More than 3 years

2. Is history your main teaching subject in school?      Yes      No

3. Other than the teacher training you had at NIE, did you do any history modules while you were in the University? If yes, for how long?

Yes

Less than a year

Between 1 – 3 years

More than 3 years

No

### Key Area 1: Teachers' views on history and the local history curriculum

*Please circle the option that most accurately describes you. I would appreciate it also if you could provide details to your responses in the open spaces provided in this questionnaire.*

4. I hold the belief that history should remain a key element in the school curriculum and am convinced of the importance of teaching history in schools.

Yes

No

Additional response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. I believe history lessons in schools should focus on the transfer of substantive historical knowledge (i.e. content-determined) rather than be focused on conceptions on the nature of history (i.e. discipline-determined).

Yes

No

Additional responses/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. I believe that the current history syllabus is not adequate in equipping our students with a sound grasp of historical concepts which will lead to a high degree of historical understanding among our students.

Yes      No      Other response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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7. As a history teacher, I believe that my first priority is to ensure that my students do well in their history examinations; promoting historical understanding comes second.

Yes      No      Additional responses/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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8. This view was expressed by a teacher who has taught secondary school history for the past six years:

*"Over the last few years, I feel the syllabus has changed from the teaching of 'content history', moving more towards the 'concepts' approach. There is a danger which I think is inherent in the teaching of concepts, because when you teach concepts without adequate content, you are basically talking in abstract terms to 13-year-olds. They are just fresh out of primary school and might not be able to understand [historical concepts]. The assumption that kids today are very bright and can learn and pick up things fast does not hold true for most students."*

Do you hold similar views as the one expressed above?

Yes      No      Others (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you feel that learning history through concepts such as *time, change, cause, empathy, evidence* and *accounts* would be inherently 'dangerous' and more difficult for secondary school students?

9. Below are two extracts from the Cambridge Examination Reports for Exam Year 2002. One is taken from the GCE 'O' Level Exam report for Paper 1 – *History of Southeast Asia, c. 1870-1971*, and the other is adapted from the GCE 'A' Level Exam reports for Paper 2 – *Southeast Asia: From Colonies to Nations, 1870-1980* and Paper 3 – *International History, 1945-1991*. The focus here is on how students had performed for the 'source-based' component of the Examinations. With reference to your area of specialization in the teaching of the subject, please indicate the extract to which you are responding to.

Extract A:

*"In Section A it appeared in some cases that candidates had a check list of criteria which they applied to all parts of the question whether it asked for inference, reliability, usefulness or the testing of an assertion ... [In part (d) of Question 1 where] the aim was to test an assertion against all given sources ... nearly all candidates took the sources at face value. Some candidates failed to refer directly to all the sources and a few wrote general accounts without reference to any. In a number of cases, candidates produced contradictory arguments..."*

- GCE 'O' Level Cambridge Exam Report, Year 2002

Extract B:

*"... In general, candidates performed less well in Question 1, the source-based question, than in the essay questions. This variation may be accounted for by the different intellectual skills called for in this question... The skill required to answer Question 1 successfully is source evaluation ... Too often, Examiners were left wondering whether a comment about a passage was really evaluation. Candidates should leave the Examiners in no doubt that they are assessing the value of a source and not just reflecting on its content (or, more usually and even less relevantly, its author)".*

- GCE 'A' Level Cambridge Exam Report, Year 2002

**You are responding to Extract \_\_\_\_\_**

What does this quotation seem to you to say?

How far does this statement indicate problems about current strategies/approaches to the teaching of sources in schools?

10. On balance, I think the inclusion of the compulsory 'source-based studies' does not make much difference to history learning in schools. It may be trendy but it doesn't work.

Agree      Disagree

Reasons for answer: \_\_\_\_\_

---

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11. Which approach to the understanding of history and historical evidence (among the following) do you closely align yourself with when you're teaching your students in the classroom?

- a. That history is a reconstruction of the past and that while all accounts must be based on the available relevant evidence different historians will interpret the past differently.
- b. That history should be regarded as a form of entertainment and a narrative that requires little examination of the evidential basis of that narrative.
- c. That history's emphasis must solely be on the accuracy of information (i.e. exact facts, and should not include comments or deductions by the historian).
- d. Others (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Explain your choice:

12. How far do you agree with the following statements: *(Please circle your answer)*

a. *Historical accounts should be objective rather than subjective.*

Strongly Agree      Broadly Agree      Broadly Disagree      Strongly Disagree

b. *Historical accounts are 'stories' that order and make sense of the past; not 'reproductions' or 'copies' of the past.*

Strongly Agree      Broadly Agree      Broadly Disagree      Strongly Disagree

c. *Historical accounts can only be written from somebody's point of view; it is not possible for historical accounts to be perspective-free.*

Strongly Agree      Broadly Agree      Broadly Disagree      Strongly Disagree



d. *Historical accounts are judged more or less acceptable differently in different cultures.*

Strongly Agree

Broadly Agree

Broadly Disagree

Strongly Disagree

13. On a scale of 1-8 (with 1 being the most important), how would you rank these reasons as to why we study history?

Approaches to history	Rank
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>History is important because it provides us with a basis for understanding the present, the origins of our society and its culture.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>History provides us with lessons from the past – knowledge that can help us in making critical decisions and in anticipating future problems.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>History offers our students training in cognitive skills and can develop their critical mental faculties when taught in the right manner.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>History holds the potential to humanize us in ways few other subjects in the school curriculum are able to offer. It allows us to understand and respect other cultures and societies, and opens us up to the story of mankind.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>In understanding our origins as a nation or society, history can create a feeling of national affinity crucial in bringing us together rather than tearing us apart.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>History offers us an understanding about the important concepts of causation, time, change &amp; continuity that will allow us to have a proper perspective about the things around us.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The multi-dimensional character of historical enquiry can offer our students the opportunity for broad-based education.</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Understanding the nature and status of historical accounts enables us to construct a rational and grounded picture of the past.</li></ul>	

Based on the above ranking, and your own experience as a teacher, have you been able to impress upon your students the need to learn history other than to pass the examinations? If your answer is 'No', what do you think are the reasons for these difficulties? If 'Yes', what has convinced them?

Your response: Yes / No

Reasons:

14. 'Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said he will ask the Education Ministry to review its history curriculum so that students will have a deeper knowledge of Singapore's past by the time they left school. The education system, he said, was "partly responsible" for younger Singaporeans not having a proper understanding of the country's history'.

- *The Straits Times*, 24.06.96



Do you think that the education system can be “partly responsible” for the lack of historical understanding among students in Singapore? Can this statement still apply now?

Your response:

What do you consider ‘a proper understanding of the country’s history’ to be?

## Key Area 2: Teachers’ background and subject competency

15. History is my first CS and my preferred teaching area.

Yes      No      Other response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. I am teaching a history syllabus whose content I am not too familiar with.

Yes      No      Other response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. I enjoy reading about historical issues & do keep myself updated on new scholarship.

Yes      No      Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

18. I have undergone adequate instruction in the teaching of history in schools.

Yes      No      Additional response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

19. I have a good understanding of particular historical concepts such as *change, time, causation, empathy, evidence* and *accounts* and am able to explain these concepts clearly in my lessons.

Yes      No      Additional response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

20. I have attended formal courses in the teaching of sources and historical interpretations & find the training useful in improving my competency as a history teacher.

Yes      No      Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

21. I still have difficulties teaching sources to my students and have doubts as to whether my teaching helps in enhancing my students' understanding of key concepts in history.

Yes      No      Additional response/comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Key Area 3: Teachers' views on student perceptions of history

22. Throughout my teaching career, I have developed certain assumptions about my students' ability to understand historical concepts, in particular evidence and historical accounts.

Yes      No

If 'Yes', please share some of these assumptions with us.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

23. If your students are confronted with a task/question asking them to explain why two historians came up with two conflicting accounts of a particular historical event, do you think they will have difficulties answering such a question?

Yes      No      Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Based on your assumptions about your students' understanding of historical accounts, what do you think they will say in answer to the question above?

24. Refer to the short extracts given below and consider the Question that follow:

**Account 1:**

The glorious rule of the Tang dynasty which had been regarded as a period of excellence and achievements unprecedented in Chinese history finally went on a decline in the middle of the eighth century. By then the lack of resources, money and men to guard the borders, the internal strife and political decay due to widespread corruption, and the frequent threats to Tang power by a combination of internal rebellions and external incursions by the barbarians had greatly weakened the dynasty. The An Lu Shan rebellion of 755 AD dealt a most destructive blow to Tang centralized control from which the dynasty was never able to recover. That was the real end of the Tang dynasty. Even though the dynasty was still able to last for slightly more than 150 years after that, it was a period marked by political disintegration, economic chaos and territorial losses.

**Account 2:**

The glorious rule of the Tang dynasty which had been regarded as a period of excellence and achievements unprecedented in Chinese history finally went on a decline in the middle of the eighth century. Floods and famine wreaked havoc and the people, heavily taxed and suffering great hardship, revolted frequently. Domestic economic instability and military defeat by the Arabs in Central Asia, and the costly struggle against internal rebellions finally exhausted the empire. The state's power began to weaken and power went into the hands of powerful regional warlords, who turned many provinces into autonomous personal domains. Misrule, court intrigues, and popular rebellions had eventually weakened the empire. The real end of the empire came when a general seized power in 907 AD, bringing an end to the once-mighty Tang dynasty.

Question: **Why are there 2 different accounts explaining the end of the Tang dynasty?**

*(Questionnaire participant need not respond to this Question. Please go on to the next question)*

Leaving aside any reading or language problems, what would you expect your a) *able* students, b) *average* students, and c) *less able* students to say in response to the Question?

a. Your *able* student would say that: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

b. Your *average* student would say that: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. Your *less able* student would say that: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

25. What are the problems and controversies (with regard to our students' understanding of history) that have arisen with the introduction of the new history syllabus? Can you suggest some opportunities and changes you would like to see in enhancing and improving the level of historical thinking among our students?

Problems/Controversies:

Opportunities:

*In what ways would you like to change students' existing perceptions of history at school?*

--- End of Questionnaire ---

*Thank you for your time and effort in filling out this questionnaire. I would be very grateful if you could send this form in the self-addressed envelope provided via post before 12 April 2004.*

**Feedback:**

Your general comments and impressions about this Questionnaire:

Did you have any difficulties in answering all the items in this Questionnaire?

Are there any items in this Questionnaire that you think need to be improved? Perhaps in terms of clarity, in the phrasing used, in the line of questioning, etc.?

Would you like to suggest other items that can be included in this Questionnaire that will assist the researcher in this study?

Thanks again for your help. I really appreciate it.

Suhaimi Afandi  
Institute of Education  
University of London

## 1d. Pilot Interview Schedule (for Teachers)

**1. What do you believe that teaching history in schools should achieve?**

What do you think are the aims of teaching history in schools?

What are your aims? (Any other aims?)

**2. How do these aims tend to work out in practice?**

Have you been able to achieve the aims you have set out for yourself?

If Yes, how so?

If No, why not?

**3. You've given me an idea about how *you* look at history teaching.**

**What would you say are the contrasting ways of looking at the teaching of history?**

How do you feel about these views?

**4. Practicalities of one sort or another often get in the way in any school.**

**Are there any things you think history teaching could do in an ideal world that aren't open to you at the moment?**

**5. Now that pupils are exposed to accounts of the past from so many different sources (TV, home, cinema, books, etc.), does this create any problems or opportunities for history teaching?**

Would this make a difference to the approach you take in teaching your pupils?

**6. Are you happy with the national curriculum for history? (leaving aside the paper-work)**

**Is there anything you feel the designers of the national curriculum in history should have taken into account that they didn't?**

**7. Do you sometimes think about what your students are thinking when you teach them about particular stories or passages about the past?**

*Think of a lesson where you've wondered about this: what sort of 'things' or 'thinking' do you think went on in their heads while you taught them?*

**8. Some people argue that for any given historical event, there tend to be several versions of it being told. Which stories should we tell our kids then?**

**9. Would spending time on understanding the nature and status of historical accounts – how they are written, why they differ, etc. – help your students understand better, or worse than, the history they are doing in school?**

*If Yes, in what way?*

*If No, why not?*

**10. People have talked about the importance of 'getting children hooked on history'.**

- **Is that your point of view?**
- **What do you understand by this?**

**What difference does this view make to the way you teach?**

## Appendix-set 2: Teachers' Instruments

### **2a. Teachers' Questionnaire**

(see next page)



**Personal Data:**

*(Please be advised that all entries will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. This section is important in the event that the researcher finds it necessary to contact you with regard to clarifying certain points that have been made).*

Your name: ..... (Mr./Miss/Mrs./Mdm)

Your school: ..... Years of service: .....

Highest level you have studied history: .....

Your e-mail: .....

**Part A** *(Where appropriate, please tick the option that most accurately describes you. If you require more space, please use the reverse of this page, while indicating the relevant question number).*

1. If you were to explain to your students what kind of subject history is, how would you describe the discipline?

History is .....  
.....  
.....

2. Do you think that history is an important component in the school curriculum or not?

Yes [ ☐ ] No [ ☐ ] Partly [ ☐ ]

Please explain your answer.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

3. Do you believe that history is a difficult subject to teach?

Yes [ ☐ ] No [ ☐ ] Partly [ ☐ ]

If 'Yes' or 'Partly', what are some problems or difficulties that you feel may have made the learning and teaching of history in schools challenging for both students and teachers?

If 'No', can you share with us why you believe history is not a difficult subject to teach?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

4. Do you find teaching historical concepts such as *time, change, cause, empathy, evidence* and *accounts* to secondary school students challenging?

Yes [    ] No [    ] Partly [    ]

Please give the reason(s) for your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Has the inclusion of the compulsory 'source-based studies' made much difference to history learning in schools?

Yes [    ] No [    ] Partly [    ]

If yes, can you say how?

If no, why do you think it hasn't made much difference?

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. What do you feel are the most important reasons why students should learn history in schools?

.....

.....

.....

.....

7. Based on your own experiences as a teacher, have you been able to impress upon your students the importance of learning history (other than to pass the examinations)?

Yes [    ] No [    ] Partly [    ]

If your answer is 'No', what do you think are the reasons for these difficulties?

If 'Yes', what has convinced them?

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Part B** (Please tick the option that most accurately describes you).

8. Do you think that your students come into your history classroom with pre-existing ideas about history?

Yes [    ]    No [    ]    Don't Know [    ]

If 'Yes', what are some of the ideas you think they might have?

If 'No', what do they need first to start them off in learning history?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

9. If you had answered 'Yes' to the previous question, do any of these (prior) ideas

... get in the way of your teaching?    [    ]

... pose problems for students' learning?    [    ]

... help your students understand better what you teach?    [    ]

Or do you find these (prior) ideas as having minimal influence on students' learning?    [    ]

(Note: Please put a tick where appropriate. You need not confine yourself to only 1 choice)

Please give an example to explain your choice(s).

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

10. Throughout your teaching career, have you developed any views about your students' ability to understand the nature and status of accounts in history?

Yes [    ]    No [    ]    Don't Know [    ]

If 'Yes', can you please share these views with us?

If 'No', what sort of ideas do you think your students have about the nature and status of accounts?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

11. If you had responded 'Yes' to the previous question, what range of ideas do your students bring to class about why historical accounts differ?

Simple	Needs changing	[    ]
Simple	Needs developing	[    ]
Complex	Useful already	[    ]
Complex	Quite sophisticated	[    ]

Please provide some examples of the kind of ideas your students bring to class (about why accounts in history differ) based on the choice(s) you've made.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

12. If your students are confronted with a task/question asking them to explain why two historians came up with two conflicting accounts of a particular historical event, do you think they will have difficulties answering such a question?

Yes [    ]    No [    ]    Don't Know [    ]

Please explain your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Let us suppose that one of your students had asked you about why there are several differing accounts of a particular historical event, how would you explain this to him/her?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please read the following task for students on the impact of the Ming abandonment of overseas expeditions, and answer Q13 below:

### **Story 1**

#### **Chapter 1:**

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. After the Mongols were overthrown in 1368, the Ming emperors rebuilt the country by repairing the Grand Canal, highways, bridges, temples and walled cities. The period also saw the reorganization of the administration, with Confucian scholars appointed as senior officials and eunuchs occupying high offices. However, these two groups of officials were constantly in conflict. During the reign of the third Ming emperor, Zhu Di, the eunuchs were the ones who ran the administration. Zhu Di's desire to expand his sovereign rule and demonstrate the power of the Ming dynasty, led him to embark on overseas expeditions in the China seas and the Indian Ocean.

#### **Chapter 2:**

From 1405 -1433, under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He, seven naval expeditions explored and brought under the Chinese tributary system a large part of the Indian Ocean. The expeditions, however, were not well-received by the Confucian officials in the Ming court. They criticized Zheng He's achievements and complained that it was too costly. The Confucian officials argued for the need to develop internal trade instead, and insisted that China's financial and manpower resources should be directed at fighting the barbarian enemy on its western borders. The death of Zhu Di in 1424 led to the rise of the scholar officials, resulting eventually in the defeat of the eunuch administrators and the political strengthening of the conservative class.

#### **Chapter 3:**

By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ming dynasty had met their trade and security needs. With the repairs to the Grand Canal completed, China now had a more efficient inland canal grain transport route, which was safe from bad weather and pirates in the open seas. Increased political stability also made it unnecessary for China to embark on extensive diplomatic expeditions. In the years after Zhu Di's death, the Confucian officials, with the support of the new emperor, began dismantling China's navy. Ships were destroyed, eunuch admirals were dismissed, and records of Zheng He's expeditions were burnt. China's self-satisfaction as the most advanced power in the world had caused it to abandon its overseas voyages. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by many countries.

### **Story 2**

#### **Chapter 1:**

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. The third emperor of the new Ming dynasty, Zhu Di, dreamed of overseas expeditions to show the world the power and capability of the Ming dynasty. In 1403, he issued orders to begin construction of an imperial fleet of multi-masted "treasure ships" to extend Chinese imperial influence. He appointed a eunuch, Zheng He, as admiral of the imperial fleet. The naval expeditions, funded by the state, were to establish Chinese predominance in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. It was the grandest systematic exploration of the Indian Ocean carried out by a single country in a scale never before seen by the known world.

#### **Chapter 2:**

From 1405 -1433, under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He, seven naval expeditions explored and brought under the Chinese tributary system a large part of the Indian Ocean. With superior nautical technology and countless inventions, the Chinese were ready to expand their influence beyond India and Africa. But suddenly they decided to suspend all overseas expeditions. After the death of Zhu Di in 1424, China saw an internal power struggle, with the conservative Confucian scholar officials emerging triumphant. With the defeat of the eunuch administrators, China's maritime adventures came to a grinding halt. The conservatives destroyed all ocean-going ships, banned the construction of new ships, and destroyed all sailing records.

#### **Chapter 3:**

By the end of Zheng He's voyages in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, China had become a strong naval power and had established itself as a powerful trade and diplomatic force. However, her decision to abandon all maritime expeditions and overseas explorations had sealed an end to the greatest navy the world had seen so far. China's rejection of sea-trade and sea-power would gradually lead to the deterioration and weakening of the Chinese navy. As China began to withdraw from its naval ambitions, other forces, at first the Portuguese and Spanish, and later the Dutch and British, began to fill the vacuum they had left. China had thus missed the chance to establish itself as the first world power. Had China not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was far stronger, more resilient and better equipped to repel the challenge by the technologically-superior foreign powers as they began to pry the country open in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.



**Question for students:** Look at the two accounts below on the significance of China's decision to abandon its overseas voyages. Why are there two different accounts explaining the impact of the Ming naval expeditions on China?

*from Story 1*

China's self-satisfaction as the most advanced power in the world had caused it to abandon its overseas voyages. This decision, however, had not greatly affected her power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by the rest of world.

*from Story 2*

China's decision to abandon all maritime expeditions and overseas explorations had sealed an end to the greatest navy the world had seen so far. Had China not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was far stronger, more resilient and better equipped to fight off the technologically-superior foreign powers as they began to pry the country open in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

13. Leaving aside any reading or language problems, what would you expect your a) *able* students, b) *average* students, and c) *less able* students to say in response to the above Question?

a. Your *able* student would say that: .....

.....  
 .....

b. Your *average* student would say that: .....

.....  
 .....

c. Your *less able* student would say that: .....

.....  
 .....

If asked how we can decide which account is better, what do you think your students will say?

.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

**End of Questionnaire.**

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete the Questionnaire. Your cooperation has been most appreciated. We would like to reassure you that whilst we may quote from the responses, we will not attribute them to named individuals or schools. All responses will remain confidential.

A gentle reminder: Please return this Questionnaire in the envelope provided to HSSE AG, NIE by 30<sup>th</sup> April 2005 at the latest. Thank you.

## 2b. Teachers' Interview Schedule

### Teachers' Interview Schedule

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Years of service \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_

Training

B.A. (Specialisation in Ed)

PGDE

Other

None

School \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Level teacher has studied history:

'O' level or equivalent

'A' level or equivalent

PGDE

B.A (Specialisation in Ed)

History degree (B.A.)

Higher degree (Hons/Masters)

M. Ed

Other subjects taught for any substantial period?  
(i.e. for a year or more, two or more periods a week)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Questions omitted \_\_\_\_\_

Questions refused \_\_\_\_\_

## *Interview protocol*

### **To begin each interview session with:**

1. Introductory comments
2. Brief description of the research project
3. Offering guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality
4. Establish the estimated duration of the interview & interviewees' liberty to answer each question (or not)
5. Asks interviewee if there is any need for clarification from his/her part
6. Takes down interviewees' personal particulars & educational backgrounds

### ***Starts interview: (note time)***

**Part A (20 mins)**

**(4 mins this Question)**

**1. What do you believe that teaching history in schools should achieve?**

What do you think are the aims of teaching history in schools?

What are your aims?

(Any other aims?)

***Do you see any of the issues you've dealt with as being especially important, or not?***

Possible issues for clarification *if subject raises them:*

Different age-levels?

Different abilities?

Long and short term aims?

Changes recently?

Internal or external to History?

1st or 2nd order?



**Part A continued**

**(5 mins this question)**

**2. How do these aims tend to work out in practice?**

Have you been able to achieve the aims you have set out for yourself?

If Yes, how so?

If No, why not?

---

Think of a lesson you recently taught that achieved what you think a history lesson ought to achieve. What *was* that achievement?

*[Leaving aside any issues of classroom management or control.]*

Or

Think of a history lesson that went less well, and failed to achieve what you would have hoped. Why were you disappointed?

*[Leaving aside any issues of classroom management or control.]*

What did it fail to achieve?

Changes recently?

**(3 mins this Question)**

**3. You've given me an idea about how *you* look at history teaching.**

**What would you say are the contrasting ways of looking at the teaching of history?**

How do you feel about these views?

(Suppose you're not working within the examination system, would this alter your perceptions as to how you view history & how you teach the subject?)

*Interviewer should try to use contrasts with staff views to get clearer about subject's ideas.*

---

How do your own views compare with those of your colleagues in school?

Some differences more important than others?

**Part A continued**

**(3 mins this Question)**

- 4. Practicalities of one sort or another often get in the way in any school. Are there any things you think history teaching could do in an ideal world that aren't open to you at the moment?**

*Why are these not possible?*

Do you think that the inclusion of the compulsory 'source-based studies' has made much difference to the learning of history in schools?

*Has it been a worthwhile introduction?*

*Does it help to develop pupils' understanding of the discipline?*

**(3 mins this Question)**

- 5. Now that pupils are exposed to accounts of the past from so many different sources (TV, home, cinema, books, etc.), does this create any problems or opportunities for history teaching?**

Would this make a difference to the approach you take in teaching your pupils?

If you had to explain to a bright 17 year-old why there was more than one version of the same event/period, what would you say?

**(2 mins this Question)**

- 6. Are you happy with the national curriculum for history? (leaving aside the paper-work)**

**Is there anything you feel the designers of the national curriculum in history should have taken into account that they didn't?**

*Interviewer to move quickly from time and resources if these are prominent.*

Aims?	Content?	Assessment?	:	Anything acceptable?
			:	Relative importance?

**Part B (30 mins max.)**

**(3 mins this Question)**

My research is trying to develop a particular way of looking at history teaching. What you've told me so far has given me some good indications as to how you see the teaching of history. The questions I want to ask now, however, is based on a preliminary model I am working with. It concerns students' historical understandings of accounts.

- 1. Some people argue that for any given historical event, there tend to be several versions of it being told. Which stories should we tell our kids then?**

How do you suppose a historical account is constructed?

**(8 mins this Question)**

- 2. I would like to refer you to some statements that are specific to the nature of historical accounts, and would appreciate your frank response to them:**

*See Card*

---

***Card***

- 1. Historical accounts should be objective rather than subjective?**  
Do you agree or not?
- 2. Historical accounts are 'stories' that make sense of the past, not 'copies' of the past.**  
Do you agree or not?
- 3. Historical accounts can only be written from somebody's point of view, it cannot be perspective-free?**  
Do you agree or not?
- 4. Historical accounts are judged (more or less) acceptable differently in different cultures.**  
Do you agree or not?

**Part B continued**

**(4 mins this Question)**

Now I would like to ask you some very specific questions about your perceptions regarding how your students learn history.

**3. Do you feel history is an especially difficult subject for children to learn, or not?**

What is difficult or easy about learning the subject?

- *Concepts/Skills?*      *Why?*      *What's difficult about them?*
- *Content?*      *Why?*  
*Characteristics of subject matter of history?*  
*Amount?*      *Knowledge / ignorance*  
*Importance of factual accuracy?*

**(4 mins this Question)**

**4. Do you feel that, sometimes, your students find it especially difficult to understand the things that you are teaching in your history classes?**

Do you have any idea why this is so?

*Concepts?    Language?    Skills?    Attitude?*

Any specific examples you can recall?

Pardon my asking, but do you ever feel that some of your students' difficulties may have something to do with your own competency in the subject?

*If Yes, in what way?*  
*If No, what other reasons do you think contribute to their difficulties?*

---

As a teacher, what is it about history that is most difficult for a non-specialist to deal with?

**5. Do you sometimes think about what your students are thinking when you teach them about particular stories or passages about the past?**

*Can you share with me some of these thoughts?*

**Add/Change:** The first question I'd like to ask you is this: Do you believe that your students come into the classroom with certain ideas about history?

*What sort of ideas do they have about historical accounts?*

*Do you think that your students have any ideas about things like the nature of historical accounts, how they are created, or how they can be distinguished from other types of stories?*

**Add:** Do you think that your students will come into contact with different versions of the past in the outside world?

*How do you suppose they will make sense of the differences then?*

*What sort of ideas do you think they will work with to sort out the differences?*

*Or do you think they'll just end up confused?*

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If, let's say, your students are confronted with a task asking them to explain why two historians came up with two conflicting accounts of a particular historical event, do you think they will have difficulties answering such a question?

Based on your ideas about your students' understanding of historical accounts, what do you think they will say in answer to this question?

*Your able student would say that ....?*

*Your average student would say that ....?*

*Your less able student would say that ....?*

**Add:** If asked how we can know which one is the better account, what would they say?

**Part B continued**

**(3 mins this Question)**

- 6. Would spending time on understanding the nature and status of historical accounts – how they are written, why they differ, etc. – help your students understand better, or worse than, the history they are doing in school?**

*If Yes, in what way?*

*If No, why not?*

**(3 mins this Question)**

- 7. Do you believe that it will have any impact on the kind of grades they produce in the examinations?**

*If Yes, in what way?*

*If No, why not?*

- 8: Finally to end this interview: Would you like to suggest some opportunities or changes you would like to see in enhancing and improving the level of historical thinking and understanding among our students?**

[Doesn't build up]

Why not?      What are the implications for the history curriculum?

[Does build up]

What builds up?      How does it build up?

How does this work out from the learner's point of view?

## Appendix-set 3: Students' Instruments

### 3a. Students' Task-set 1: The Ming Naval Expeditions

#### **Story 1**

##### **Chapter 1:**

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. After the Mongols were overthrown in 1368, the Ming emperors rebuilt the country by repairing the Grand Canal, highways, bridges, temples and walled cities. They also reorganized the administration, and appointed Confucian scholars and eunuchs in high offices. However, these two groups of officials were constantly in conflict. During the reign of the third Ming emperor, Zhu Di, the eunuchs were the ones who ran the administration. Zhu Di's desire to demonstrate the power of the Ming dynasty led him to embark on several overseas expeditions.

##### **Chapter 2:**

From 1405-1433, under the leadership of Admiral Zheng He, seven naval expeditions brought many territories around the Indian Ocean under the Chinese tributary system. The Confucian officials, however, were not happy. They complained that the expeditions had been too costly and had not brought any real benefits to China. The officials argued for the need to develop internal trade instead, and emphasized the importance of canal transport as a means to avoid the menace of sea-pirates. They also insisted that China's financial and manpower resources should be concentrated on fighting the new Mongol threat on its northern borders. The death of Zhu Di in 1424 would lead to the increase in the power and influence of the Confucian officials.

##### **Chapter 3:**

By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the repairs to the Grand Canal were completed. China now had a more efficient inland canal grain transport route that was safe from bad weather and marauding pirates in the open seas. The defeat of the eunuch administrators meant that the Confucian scholars had a stronger influence on China's policies. As the most advanced power in the world at that time, they felt that there was no need for China to sustain her overseas voyages. With the support of the new emperor, the Confucian officials began dismantling China's navy. Ships were destroyed, eunuch admirals were dismissed, and records of Zheng He's expeditions were burnt. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by many countries.

#### **Story 2**

##### **Chapter 1:**

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, China was the most technologically advanced nation in the world. The third emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Di, dreamed of overseas expeditions to demonstrate China's power and capability. He issued orders to begin construction of a fleet of "treasure ships" to extend Chinese imperial influence. He appointed a eunuch, Zheng He, as admiral of the imperial fleet. The naval expeditions, funded by the state, were to establish Chinese predominance in many parts of Asia. It was the grandest systematic exploration of the Indian Ocean carried out by a single country on a scale never before seen by the known world.

##### **Chapter 2:**

From 1405-1433, Zheng He led seven naval expeditions that had explored and brought under the Chinese tributary system a large part of the Indian Ocean. These were truly epic voyages of trade and discovery that had established Chinese influence everywhere. With superior nautical technology and numerous inventions, China was ready to expand her influence beyond India and Africa. But suddenly she decided to suspend all expeditions. The death of Zhu Di in 1424 had led to an internal power struggle. The eunuchs had lost out to the conservative Confucian officials, and with this defeat, China's maritime adventures came to an end. The conservatives destroyed all ocean-going ships, banned construction of new ships, and destroyed all sailing records.

##### **Chapter 3:**

By the end of Zheng He's voyages in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, China had established herself as a powerful trade and diplomatic force. However, her decision to abandon all overseas expeditions would lead to unforeseeable consequences that would, in the end, be disastrous for China. As the most advanced power in the world at that time, China had underestimated the importance of interaction with other powers on an open and equal basis, which would have allowed for technological interchanges and trade with the Western countries. Her retreat into isolation amounted to a catastrophic missed opportunity that would later lead to the rise of Europe. Had China not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was wealthier, safer and far stronger, and perhaps more importantly, one that was not in hostile relationships with the Western countries that would begin to force the country open in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Read the two stories above and answer the following questions:*

**Question 1:** Do you detect any important differences in the two accounts (Story 1 and Story 2)? If **YES**, what are these differences? If **NO**, explain why you think the two stories are telling you the same thing.

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**Question 2:** Look at the two stories again. Does the dismantling of Zheng He's navy matter in the same way in both Story 1 and Story 2?

**Choose one answer (YES or NO)**

**YES:** If you think it does matter in the same way, explain how.

**NO:** If you think it does not matter in the same way, explain why not.

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**Question 3:** Look at the two accounts given below on the significance of China's decision to abandon her overseas voyages. Answer the questions that follow:

*from Story 1*

... As the most advanced power in the world at that time, the Confucian officials felt that there was no need for China to sustain her overseas voyages. With the support of the new emperor, they began dismantling China's navy. Ships were destroyed, eunuch admirals were dismissed, and records of Zheng He's expeditions were burnt. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by many countries.

*from Story 2*

... By the end of Zheng He's voyages in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, China had established herself as a powerful trade and diplomatic force. However, her decision to abandon all overseas expeditions would lead to unforeseeable consequences that would, in the end, be disastrous for China ... Had China not turned inwards after Zheng He's exploits, it could have become a nation that was wealthier, safer and far stronger, and perhaps more importantly, one that was not in hostile relationships with the Western countries that would begin to force the country open in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

a. Why is there a difference in terms of how these accounts explained the importance of China's abandoning of her overseas voyages?

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b. Is there any means where we can decide which account is better?

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c. Is one account better than the other?

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**Question 4:** Read the accounts written by three different historians below:

**A**

In the years after Zhu Di's death, the Confucian scholar officials, with the support of the new emperor, began dismantling China's navy. This decision, however, had not greatly affected China's power and prestige. At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, China remained one of the most internally stable political structures in the world, one that was economically self-sufficient, and a power that was respected by many countries.

**B**

By the end of Zheng He's voyages in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, China had become a strong naval power and had established herself as a powerful trade and diplomatic force. However, her decision to abandon all maritime expeditions and overseas explorations would lead to unforeseeable consequences that would, in the end, be disastrous for China.

**C**

China had thus missed the chance to establish itself as the first world power. Her rejection of sea-trade and sea-power would gradually lead to the deterioration and weakening of her navy. Had China not retreated into isolation, she could have become a nation that was far stronger, more resilient and better equipped to fight off the technologically-superior foreign powers as they began to pry the country open in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

a. On a scale of 1 – 6, how far do these three accounts **agree** or **disagree** about the **importance** of China's decision to dismantle its navy and abandon its policy of overseas naval explorations?

*Circle the number that best fits your answer.*

Agree  $\Leftarrow$     1            2            3            4            5            6     $\Rightarrow$  Disagree

Explain why you think as you do:

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b. If you think these accounts **agree** (*i.e. if you had circled 1 – 3*), explain why any seeming differences do not matter.

If you think these accounts **disagree** (*i.e. if you had circled 4 – 6*), explain why you think historians write different stories about the same bit of history.

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**Question 5:** Consider the following questions:

How far do you agree with the claim that if two historians have access to the same evidence and artefacts, the ‘stories’ that they both write will largely be the same? Why do you think so?

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*End of Task*

Thank you for your participation. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.



### 3b. Students' Task-set 2: The British Rule in Singapore

#### **Story 1**

##### Chapter 1:

When Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819, the island was a fishing village with a small group of Malay, Chinese and Orang Laut settlers. After Singapore became a British possession, it rose in importance as a great commercial centre and attracted many immigrants from foreign lands who were in search of a better life. Soon, the population of Singapore rose very rapidly. These Asian immigrants would contribute to the growth of Singapore in many ways.

##### Chapter 2:

After 1867, Singapore became a Crown Colony under the direct control of the Colonial Office in London. Despite having a population that comprised mainly Asians, however, the British government ruled Singapore with little Asian participation. In addition, the government did not treat Asians working in the government very fairly. There was discrimination against the Asians serving in the government as the British preferred to reward people according to their race. Europeans were regarded as superior and were treated as more important people than Asians. Asians who were as well qualified as Europeans were not given important posts in government departments, or were given lower salaries. The British also allowed discrimination to continue in many aspects of public life. All this made many Asians dislike the British for their unfair treatment.

##### Chapter 3:

In 1942, the Japanese invaded Singapore. The British were beaten and had to surrender Singapore. For the next three and a half years, the people of Singapore were treated cruelly by their Japanese conquerors. The defeat of their much-regarded superior British colonial masters had a profound impact on the minds of the people of Singapore. They had looked up to the British to protect them against the Japanese. When they saw how easily the Japanese had defeated the British forces, they lost confidence and respect for the British. They realized that an Asian race such as the Japanese could be superior to a European power. The other peoples of Asia who were under colonial rule also felt the same way. After the war, the people of India, Burma, Indonesia, Malaya and Singapore fought to get rid of their colonial masters and to rule their countries themselves.

#### **Story 2**

##### Chapter 1:

When Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819, the island was a small fishing village. Raffles had the foresight to recognize the strategic significance of Singapore as an ideal location to establish a port that can be used to break the Dutch monopoly of trade in the region. Under British rule, Singapore would rise in importance as a key gateway to the China trade, a great commercial centre, and the most prosperous of the British crown colonies.

##### Chapter 2:

When Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1867 under the direct control of the Colonial Office in London, the government in Singapore was dominated by Europeans. This was typical of European administration of colonies in Southeast Asia at that time, where Asians were for many decades given only secondary roles in government. Nonetheless, under British rule, Singapore saw an expansion of trading activities and became the main economic centre of British Malaya. Her strategic location as well as developments in technology, communications and international trade, had ensured her prosperity and eminence as a port of call. In 1942, however, the Japanese invasion disrupted British administration of the colony for three and a half years. The defeat was a temporary setback for British rule in Singapore, as by 1945 the British were back as rulers.

##### Chapter 3:

Although many people welcomed their return, the people's attitude towards the British had changed after the war. Nevertheless, the British proceeded with the task of rebuilding the country and undertook measures to improve the living conditions of the people of Singapore, while at the same time, restoring the prosperity and the economic well-being of the colony. They also began to address the political aspirations of the people for local government. Although they were not willing to give up control over Singapore, the British would gradually pave the way for limited self-government and the granting of eventual independence in 1965. After 146 years of British colonial rule, the people of Singapore now had the right to govern their own country. Under local leadership, island would continue to prosper and grow into the modern city-state that she is today.

*Have you read Story 1 & Story 2 above? If you have, now answer the following questions:*

**Question 1:** Do you detect any differences in the plot presented in the two stories? If **NO**, explain why you think there are no important differences. If **YES**, explain what you think the differences are.

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**Question 2a:** If you had answered **YES** to the previous question (i.e. *Yes, there are important differences*), how would you explain the difference in the accounts?

**Question 2b:** If you had answered **NO** to the previous question (i.e. *No, there are no important differences*), explain why the two stories use different words and seem to talk about different things.

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**Question 3:** Does the impact of British rule in Singapore matter in the same way in both stories (Story 1 and Story 2)?

**Choose one answer (YES or NO)**

**YES:** If you think it does matter in the same way, explain how.

**NO:** If you think it does not matter in the same way, explain why not.

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**Question 4:** Read the two stories again. Answer the following questions:

a. How could we decide whether one account is better than the other?

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b. Is one account better than the other? Explain your answer.

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**Question 5:** Consider the following questions:

a. If you were asked to explain why two historians, who have access to the same resources, write different stories about the same event, what would your answer be?

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Thank you for your participation. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

### 3c. Students' Interview Schedule

## Students' Ideas About History and the Nature of Accounts in History: Interview Schedule

Level: Secondary 2 / JC1

School \_\_\_\_\_

**Names :**

Student A: \_\_\_\_\_ (L) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Student B: \_\_\_\_\_ (C) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Student C: \_\_\_\_\_ (R) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

(For JC1 students only) : **Years spent studying history in school?**

**Student A:**

(History at GCE 'O' Level Exams: Yes / No)

**Student B:**

(History at GCE 'O' Level Exams: Yes / No)

**Student C:**

(History at GCE 'O' Level Exams: Yes / No)

**Date of interview** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time of interview** \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions omitted** \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions refused** \_\_\_\_\_

**Before we begin:**

Let me thank you all again for agreeing to participate in this study.

[As you already know by now, my name is Mr. Suhaimi, and I am a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, University of London, undertaking research on how students in school view the study of history and their ideas about the nature of the subject.

Now, I'll be asking you some questions on my list, but that's just to remind me that I have to keep myself in some sort of order. Do feel free to wander away from the list if you want to.

I'll be recording our conversation in this digital recorder because if not, I'll simply forget the things that you've said, and taking down notes will really slow everything down. Are you all alright with that?

This conversation should last about 35 minutes. Everything you say will be strictly confidential: If I do write any of it up, I'll invent names for you, so no one will know who you really are.]

**Is there anything you would like to ask before we begin?**

**1. Let me start by asking the three of you some general impressions you have about history and what you have learnt about history in your classrooms. Now, if I were to ask you what history is, what would you say?**

History is ..... the 'past'? the 'before now'? etc.  
What do you understand by 'history'?  
Can you tell me what history is not?

**2. Why do you think we should study history?**

Should we study history just for the sake of passing the examinations?  
Is learning history personally significant to you?  
Can you tell me why history is still (or no longer) relevant today?  
What are the skills you can acquire in history that you cannot get from studying other subjects?

**3. Do you think that history is an exceptionally difficult subject to learn in school, or not?**

Why do you think so?  
What is so difficult about the subject?

*Concepts/Skills?      Why?      What's difficult about them?*

*Content?      Why?*  
*Characteristics of subject matter of history?*  
*Amount?      Knowledge / ignorance*  
*Importance of factual accuracy?*

**4. What history have you studied since you've been in school?**

Can you sum up what was going on in the history you've studied?  
Can you tell me what the most important themes were, from your perspective?  
What did you learn from the history that you've studied?



**5. Now, I would like to ask you some questions about accounts or stories in history: What do you consider to be a historical account (*or a history story*)?**

What is the difference between a historical account and other kinds of story?  
If you were to browse through the shelves in a bookshop or a library, which book would you refer to as a historical account or a history story?  
How do you separate a history story from other kinds of stories (*such as*)?

**6. How far do you think that historical accounts are ‘true stories’ about the past?**

How do you decide how a particular account is true?  
What makes the account/story ‘true’?

**7. Let’s consider the story of Singapore history so far. From what you’ve done in school or from what you’ve heard at home (through the TV, movies, books, or anything else) –**

What kind of story would you say it was?  
What is the main plot (or plots) to the story?  
Who do you think should narrate the history of Singapore?  
Is there a single story, or several stories, about the history of Singapore?  
Should there be a single story, or a diversity of stories ....?  
How do you decide which is the best story?

**8. Now, do you remember the written task that I asked you to do earlier on about the two accounts on the Ming naval expeditions? Do you think that this issue about having two accounts of the same event is important, slightly important, or not important at all? Why do you think so?**

**9. What about for the historians (or your history teachers for that matter). Would they think that this issue is important, slightly important, or not important at all? Why do you think so?**

**10. If I were to ask you why two historians may write different stories about a particular historical event, what would you say?**

*Why do you think there are two contrasting accounts explaining the impact of Ming naval expeditions on China?*

**Now, I want you to look at these statements and consider this question: “Why do historians write two different stories about the same event”. Next, between the three of you, I want you to rank these statements according to the order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 6, being the least important:**

- g) *There can't be just one story because historians have different purposes/motives.*
- h) *There are several stories of the same event because some historians are biased.*
- i) *There are several history stories of the same event because these stories are written to fit different questions.*
- j) *There is not enough information so historians write stories based on what they know.*
- k) *Since no one was there, no one can really know what actually happened, so historians write history based on their own opinion.*
- l) *Sometimes, people who witnessed the events did not leave behind any records, so historians have to guess what happened.*

[Follow-up each response with probes:

Why did you pick that statement as your first choice?

What's the difference between statement (a) and statement (c)? Or do you think they are the same?

How far do you think that historians are biased when they write their history stories?

Do you think a lack of information is a problem a historian faces each time he/she wants to write a history story?

Are history stories based entirely on historians' opinions? What should a historian depend on when he/she writes his/her history story? How do you distinguish history stories that are based on opinions (*and ones that are supported by evidence*)?

If there are no eyewitnesses to an event, will it be possible for a historian to write his/her story? Or will he/she have to make a guess as to what really happened?

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**Part B (continued)**

**(8 mins this page)**

**11. Now, I would like you to consider this statement: (see Card)**

***“History is what really happened, and it only happened one way, so there can only be one proper story about the past.”***

Do you agree with this statement?

Why do you think so?

Now, let's be sure I understand what you've said. I'm going to try to break up this statement into smaller parts, and I'd like you to help me just check I understand what you mean:

- a. *“History is about what really happened in the past”* – Do you agree?  
Yes? No? Why do you think so?
- b. *“The past has already happened, and it happened the way it was”* – Do you agree?  
Yes? No? Why do you think so?
- c. *“All things happened in the past only happened once”* – Do you agree?  
Yes? No? Why do you think so?
- d. *“Therefore, there is only one proper history story about an event”* – Do you agree?  
Yes? No? Why do you think so?

**12. Given what we've just talked about, do you think that these two accounts or stories about the Ming expeditions could both be acceptable or be proper history stories?**

Why do you think so?

How do you decide?

Do you think either of the accounts can be regarded as 'true' accounts?

How can you know which one is better?

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**END OF INTERVIEW:**

Thank you again for your participation in this research project. All of you have been most helpful. I greatly appreciate your cooperation.